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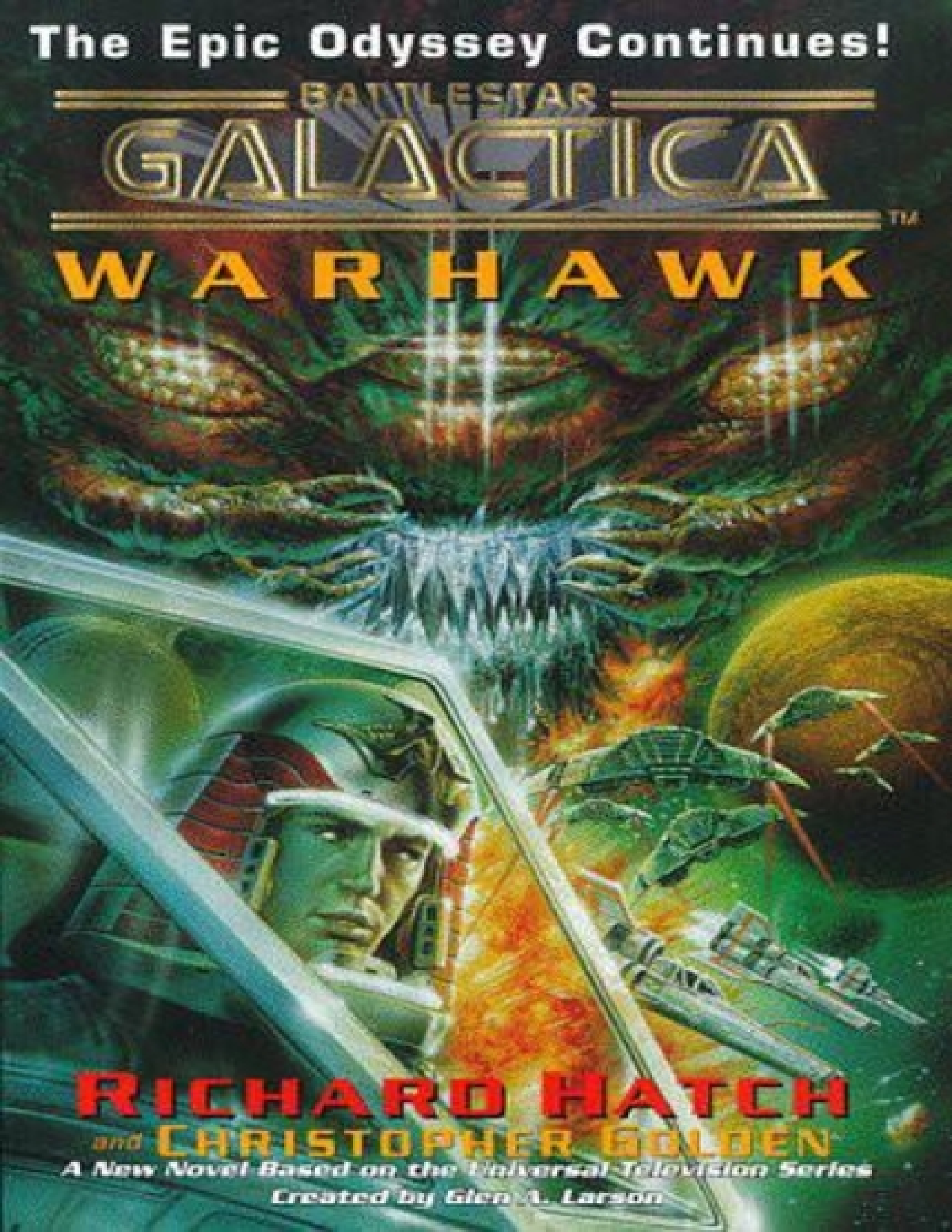

RICHARD HATCH
and CHRISTOPHER GOLDEN

A New Novel Based on the Universal Television Series

Created by Glen A. Larson

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Prologue

VALOR DELIGHTED IN THE STARSHINE and the silence of the celestial sea. He was in stationary orbit around the third moon of the planet Xerik-12, and had been there enjoying the tranquility for much longer than he knew he should. He was overdue to return to the outpost on that moon that had been established by his people, the Sky. Valor had just begun his descent toward the lunar atmosphere when the stellar serenity was shattered by a horrible psychic scream— a scream that quickly became the agonizing wail of a pair of his Sky brothers in their death throes.

Then there was silence once more.

The Sky were a gentle race. Peaceful and loving. To them, there were few troubles that could not be solved by soaring through the air of their home planet, or even the distant worlds and moons upon which they had built their embassies. Still fewer existed that would not be cured by a brief sail on the astral winds.

A gentle race.

But not a foolish one. The Sky knew that their benevolence was not shared by all of their galactic neighbors. And knowing this, they had become a race of warriors.

The instant Valor heard the first psychic cries, pseudopods extended from the front tip of his body to alter his course. What surrounded him was part starship, part armor. It followed quite closely the contours of his body, and served as a protective covering as well. Even without their armored shells, the Sky could propel themselves through the air, and space; but the armor had its own engines, which made long-distance space travel less dangerous and, of course, faster.

Even the strongest Sky could not fly without rest indefinitely. Valor could feel the power in his armor, the way its plating conformed to the wide, flat, muscular “wings” that made up the halves of his body—a slightly swollen crescent moon, tips forward. At the convex curve of the crescent shape—Valor’s backside—was the green fire of his armor’s internal engine. And at the midpoint of the inner curve, between the tips, sat the hard-light plasma cannon that was his only weapon. The Sky were one with their armor.

As his pseudopods slid over the interior controls, Valor spread his consciousness out into space. He reached across the void, searching the area from which those screams had come. He found nothing there but cold space.

Nothing.

And then…something.

What Valor found was pure, unadulterated hate. It radiated across space over the third moon of Xerik-12, and Valor understood immediately what it meant. He sensed the intent of those hate-filled minds, and he knew that he had to act right away.

With the force of his mind, he added to the power of his engine, and propelled himself even more rapidly, closing the space between his own armored form and the craft—more than a dozen—that even now swept down upon the Sky embassy on that third moon.

He traversed the distance as quickly as he could. As he grew nearer, starlight glittering off his armor, the cold vacuum of space sliding past him, he began to get a better sense of what he was dealing with. As if he hadn't known all along.

The Chitain.

They were a lethal race, savage warriors with naturally armored bodies and poisonous bone-tipped tails. Their vessels were equally lethal: tapered cylinders which housed a three-member flight crew and another trio on board wearing atmosphere suits who would act as infantry if the ship landed. But these three had another function as well. If a Chitain craft managed to damage an enemy vessel, they would synch up to that ship and leave their own to attack it.

The Chitain were scavengers. Nothing was wasted. Ships were taken and captives eaten or enslaved, depending upon the palatability of their race.

These were the thoughts most prominent in Valor's mind as he dipped his left wing and began moving on a path to try to intercept the Chitain attack on the embassy below. But one thought stood out among them all. *Betrayers!*

His mind screamed it at them, and a pair of Chitain vessels broke off from the attack to turn and face him. They were not a psi-sensitive race, but any sentient being would have felt the brunt of Valor's telepathic fury in

that moment. They knew he was there. They were coming ‘round to face him.

Betrayers! he psi-shouted again, and ignored the two that had broken off to meet him. Instead, he headed after the main body of the attackers. The other two would lose precious time in altering their course. By then, he might have had an impact on the attack force.

Valor’s fury was genuine. The Chitain were native to Xerik-7. Were, in fact, the only sentient race native to the Xerik system, and it was an embassy to them that the Sky had built on the third moon of Xerik-12. It had been a peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship. Until now. What disturbed him most was the utter unexpectedness of this attack. Certainly the Chitain were a vicious race, but there had been nothing to indicate they would make war. No slight nor insult to begin it. Only duplicity.

Fury drove Valor on as the combination of engine and telekinesis powered him forward. There were ten Chitain ships ahead of him, dropping down toward the moonbase, which had already become visible. The thin atmosphere began to drag on the ships, and a bright flame burned briefly around each of them, and around Valor as well. The Chitain craft were unlike any other space-faring vessels Valor had ever encountered. Though the warrior race had shared some of its technology and culture with the Sky, they had never allowed their ships to be inspected up close. As such, it had been impossible to determine if the many tendrils snaking from the nose of a Chitain ship were actually bio-mechanoid, or merely appeared that way. Certainly, it would take particularly advanced technology to cause mere machines to move the way those tendrils did.

They were, based on outward appearances, the chief mode of navigation and propulsion for Chitain craft. Each ship had a complement of at least twelve such tendrils, protruding from the nose and curling out and back, from which a small jet of crimson energy burned. The rear of each Chitain craft was equally curious, for it was equipped with a tail that mimicked those of the Chitain themselves. The wide metallic stinger generally curled under and forward, and fired upon enemies from that position, but it could be moved to fire in other directions as well. Odd craft they were, reminiscent in a way of lifeforms the Sky had studied from the oceans of various worlds in their quadrant of the galaxy. But devastating. Just as their builders were.

With the pressure of the moon’s atmosphere on him now, Valor gave up any pretense of flight. Instead, he threw himself toward the lunar surface and the Sky embassy there with the ardor of a lover, using his ship, his mind, and gravity.

Below him, the Chitain craft fell into pattern to begin a strafing run on the embassy. Ahead, Valor saw several Sky approaching from the distant embassy—that was not yet in sight—but only two of them were armored. The others were flying unprotected, apparently hoping to draw fire away from the embassy by sacrificing themselves—which was what they must do, for the sake of the Sky. And, indeed, several of the Chitain set off after these new arrivals. But the others continued on.

Inside the shell of his armor, Valor’s pseudopods flowed over the navigational controls. But when the moment came, and he leveled out behind the Chitain attackers, he gave the command telepathically. *Fire*! he thought. The ship that enshrouded him responded to his command. Green fire sprang from the crux of his metal shell, where outthrust wings met in devastating weaponry. As if it were the hand of an angry deity, the green flame snaked out and touched the rearmost Chitain craft.

The vessel exploded.

Valor’s blood raced and in his mind, he cried out in triumph. The cry was meant for his people, to reassure and encourage them. But he did not balk at the idea that it would also be felt by the Chitain. He wanted them to know he was there, that he had just taken the lives of six of their race. With a brief moment of focus, Valor sent a mental image to all of the Chitain who were attacking the embassy.

An image of their ships aflame, exploding. Then another image, of thousands of Sky warriors sweeping down over the surface of Xerik-7 destroying Chitain cities.

So intent was Valor upon his attack, upon projecting his ferocity, that he nearly did not sense the hatred and arrogance that at that moment fell in behind him. The pair of Chitain craft had come in on a dangerous vector, dropped almost too close to the lunar surface, and were even now gaining on Valor.

The engine tendrils that spread out and back from the face of each craft pulled tightly to the sides of the ships, cutting down on atmospheric resistance. Stingers slung beneath the Chitain attackers began to glow crimson.

They fired in unison. Red plasma blasts burned across the distance between predator and prey, on a direct line for Valor’s armored shell. But in the instant they would have destroyed his ship, and taken his life, Valor was no longer there.

He had manipulated the minds of the Chitain pilots. They had seen him where he was not, and reacted as such. It was a trick he could use again if necessary, but with each change of focus, he lost speed. And if he hoped to stop the attack on the embassy…

The embassy.

They were nearly upon it. Valor put all of his energy into speed, drove his ship’s engine without a care for caution or consequence. The Chitain behind him kept up, their weapons trained on him again.

Valor fired. Two more of the Chitain ships ahead of him were destroyed by his assault.

The pair on his tail fired as well, and he had no chance to use his telepathy to distract them. The crimson flames burned toward Valor, an easy target in his shining shell.

And passed by him on either side.

His spirit soared as Valor realized what had happened—they had thought to be clever, firing on either side in the belief that one of them was certain to hit the Sky warrior. Lucky again. But his luck was sure to run out quickly.

They rose above a small craggy peak on the lunar surface, and then the embassy lay before them. The enemies in pursuit of Valor’s ship might fire again at any time. He knew he had only one more chance, and then he would have to pull away and come ‘round again.

Valor fired and destroyed a fourth Chitain craft.

Then he urged his ship up, up through the lunar atmosphere and out into the vacuum of space once more. He could sense the brightness of stars; in his mind he could see their brilliance.

The two ships that had been pursuing him had not turned to follow. Instead, they had continued on with their fellow warriors to begin their attack on the embassy.

No! Valor thought.

As quickly as he was able, he began to turn, planning to knife down toward the embassy and attack the Chitain from above.

But even as he turned, Valor could sense them.

The main body of the Chitain fleet—six troop carriers and nearly one hundred fighters—forged through space toward him… to ward the Sky embassy on the moon below.

Valor fired.

In return, dozens of Chitain stingers fired crimson death.

Chapter One

APOLLO COULDN’T BREATHE.

He stared into the burning, feral eyes of Gar’Tokk, leader of the Borellian Nomen, and saw death. Gar’Tokk’s thick arms were wrapped around Commander Apollo’s chest, squeezing.

With a grunt, Apollo felt a rib give way.

Around them, in an arena on the starship *Ligeia*, a crowd of hundreds roared with bloodlust. Apollo was too busy to glance around, and he was glad. He wouldn’t want to see the fear for his life that was no doubt etched on the faces of his family and friends. They ought to know he wouldn’t die on them—Apollo didn’t like to let people down.

Now, if he could just figure out how to survive the next few seconds, maybe he wouldn’t mind so much when Starbuck told him what a mindwipe he’d been to get himself into this situation in the first place. Gar’Tokk roared in fury and triumph, squeezed tighter, and snapped another rib.

Twenty centari earlier, Apollo had boarded the *Ligeia* with Captain Starbuck and Lieutenant Troy. The three men had walked in relative silence toward the massive forum at the center of the ship. While most sporting events were held on board the *Rising Star*—including all Triad tournaments—the large open area of the *Ligeia* was used for theatrical productions and musical performances.

The event planned for this evening was a bit different, however. It was a death match.

“You can’t do this, Father!” Troy snapped angrily. Apollo shook his head. “We’ve been over this, Troy. If you objected, you ought to have stayed behind.”

“Stayed…” Troy paused, mouth open slightly, then grabbed Apollo by the arm and stopped him short, turned him so that they were face to face. Apollo stared into his son’s blue eyes, unwilling to look away, to acknowledge the logic Troy employed. It wouldn’t do any good. Logic had nothing to do with the proceedings of that night.

“What I should have done is told Sheba and Athena about this insanity!” Troy said, and searched his father’s eyes for some capitulation.

“You’ve got to be sniffing vapors, or something. What if he kills you?”

“Then he kills me,” Apollo replied. “Athena is fully capable of commanding this fleet. We all know that.”

“That’s hardly the point!” Troy shouted.

Apollo sighed and stepped around his son, continued walking toward the amphitheater with Star buck just behind him.

“Starbuck!” Troy snapped. “You talk to him. You’re his best friend, you’ve got to tell him how crazy this is.”

With a small chuckle, Starbuck stopped in his tracks. Apollo kept walking. It was too late for him to change his mind. The repercussions would be swift and debilitating. Word of the death match had yet to reach the rest of the fleet, but if he backed out, word of his cowardice most certainly would. While most would think him a fool for agreeing to it in the first place, those very same people would be the first to condemn him should he withdraw.

Troy kept pace with Apollo, glancing over his shoulder at Starbuck. Finally, curiosity won out and Apollo turned to see what had caused Starbuck to pause.

Starbuck stood a few metrons back in the corridor, leaning against the saligium wall with a fumarello clenched firmly between his teeth. He lit a match and ignited the end of the smoke. Apollo raised an eyebrow.

“What are you waiting for, Captain?” he asked.

“The kid’s right, *Commander*,” Starbuck replied. Any shadow of amusement disappeared from Starbuck’s face at that moment. The maverick, the joker, the charmer, the gambler—he was all of those things, but he was also the best pilot in the fleet and the best friend of its commander. And he looked every centimetron the part. Until half a yahren earlier, when what remained of the human race—in the form of the Colonial fleet—had come into contact with Cylons once more after a six yahren break, Starbuck had grown a little soft around the middle. There was nothing soft about him anymore. Except, Apollo thought, for the way he remained unable to decide between two women who loved him, in spite of the tension it often created. Starbuck was lean and fit, an exemplary Warrior, with only the barest hint of white beginning to show in his light brown hair. The old charm was still there, but the twinkle in his eye was informed by a new wisdom that had come to him with the passing yahren.

Apollo had always respected him, but not always taken what Starbuck said seriously. That had changed.

“I’m sorry,” Apollo said, frowning. “What do you mean, he’s right? You know how important this is.”

Starbuck nodded, exhaling a stream of fumarello smoke. “I know how important you think it is. And I agreed with you that it was important, until I found out it was a death match.”

Apollo walked back toward Starbuck, getting angry himself now. Troy followed a few steps behind, and even without using the telepathic abilities that his Kobollian heritage gave him, Apollo could sense the energy that traveled between his son and Starbuck. They conspired to save his life. But Apollo didn’t believe that his life needed saving.

“You don’t think I can win?” Apollo asked.

“Not the point, Commander,” Starbuck replied.

“Stop calling me that!” Apollo snapped.

“Sorry,” Starbuck shrugged. “Commander.” He smiled. “The Borellian Nomen, what few of them are left on the *Icarus* now—and what are there, ten?”

“Nine,” Troy volunteered.

“Ah,” Starbuck said, nodding again. “So these nine citizens of the fleet—all of whom, I don’t have to remind you, were imprisoned on the *Icarus* even before they rebelled against the Quorum, killed a bunch of wardens and commandeered the ship—you want to show respect for their culture by agreeing to fight their leader to the death?”

“I accepted his challenge,” Apollo replied. “Granted, I didn’t know it was for a death match, but if this is what is necessary to show the Nomen that there is some honor in their human cousins, what else can I do? If Gar’Tokk had not turned against Count Iblis when he did, the fleet would have been destroyed.”

Apollo recalled again his meeting with Gar’Tokk several weeks earlier. Though it had been clear that despite their actions, the Nomen had to be returned to the prison ship *Icarus*, the Nomen themselves wanted to be delivered to the first habitable planet the fleet passed, and allowed to fend for themselves, just as their ancestors had under the leadership of Borellus.

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that,” Apollo had said. Which was when Gar’Tokk had spoken the words that had disturbed Apollo.

“What gives you the right to make that decision?” Gar’Tokk had asked.

“We were not subject to Colonial rule while our tribes remained on Caprica.”

“Yet you are here by choice, to escape the Cylons…” Apollo had countered.

“That was nearly twenty yahren ago,” Gar’Tokk growled. “We were offered an escape and we took it. Now we wish to determine our own future. And we will. Humans are lesser creatures. You have no right to hold us.”

Of course, in Apollo’s mind was the knowledge that the Nomen could be vicious killers when they set their mind to it. At best, they were uncooperative and flagrant in their disregard for law and authority. But Gar’Tokk’s words had the ring of truth to them. This bothered Apollo. The Nomen ought to pay for what they’d done, but he had to wonder if those events would have taken place had they been given their sovereignty long ago. Still, there had to be some kind of justice.

“You were citizens of the fleet—or at the very least its guests— when you committed the crimes we are holding you for. We have every right. And as far as lesser creatures, well, you are our captives, aren’t you?” Apollo had asked.

He hadn’t meant to taunt, only to reason. But he saw the immediate effect his words had had on Gar’Tokk. The Nomen leader’s protruding brow had creased in anger, leathery lips drawing back to reveal sharp fangs. The matted hair on Gar’Tokk’s head seemed to stand up a bit.

“I challenge you, then,” Gar’Tokk had said. “In the arena. You and I in a battle for the right to control the destiny of the Nomen. We will see who is the superior race.”

Apollo had raised his eyebrows and stared at Gar’Tokk for several seconds. The offer had stunned him. Though Gar’Tokk was obviously certain he would win—and after all, he was far more vicious and powerful than Apollo—what he had suggested was extraordinary. For, if Apollo should win, the Nomen’s code of honor would demand that they become nothing less than model citizens of the fleet.

Conversely, however, if he declined Gar’Tokk’s challenge it would be the gravest of insults, only compounding his words of moments ago, which Gar’Tokk had already taken as insult. The Nomen would go berserk. Apollo had once seen a Noman in a rage over a breach of honor. Though he had been completely outnumbered, and the only result would be his death, the

Noman had attacked in a frenzy. Honor was more important to the Nomen than life itself.

“What else can I do?” Apollo repeated.

“You can get Council Security and a squadron of Warriors down here and put them all back on the *Icarus* where you found them,” Starbuck said.

“If I don’t keep my word, they’ll riot,” Apollo said. “They’ll die before they’ll go back to their cells.”

“Then they’ll die,” Troy said simply. Coldly.

Apollo opened his mouth to reply, but clamped it shut just as quickly. He stared at his son. Then at Starbuck. Finally, he turned on his heel and started down the corridor again, heading for the forum ahead.

“You can accompany me or not, whatever you like,” he said casually. He could sense their fear and anger, even sense the moment when the two men looked at one another to share their frustration. But then they started after him, and Apollo put aside thoughts of those closest to him. He thought of only one thing.

Staying alive.

Even before he reached the door to the forum and shoved it open, he knew that something had gone wrong. There were people inside the forum. Thousands of them.

Apollo shoved the door open and stood there as a cheer of welcome and support echoed through the vast chamber. TransVid skyeye cameras zipped across the air in front of him and above him.

“Guess this wasn’t much of a secret, eh?” Starbuck said behind him. Commander Apollo shot him a suspicious glance, but he knew from Starbuck’s expression that his friend wasn’t responsible. Troy also looked as though he were just as surprised as they were. Then he saw Troy’s eyes narrow with anger, and he turned to see what Troy was looking at. And there she was. Petite, blonde, beautiful, with a mischievous smile on her face that meant there would never be any doubt whose daughter she was.

“Dalton!” Troy snapped.

The girl—for she was still a girl—only shrugged and smiled. “If Commander Apollo can do something as stupid as this, he ought to have an audience.”

Apollo smiled and shook his head. Not a lot of people could have gotten away with such a statement. Especially a rookie Warrior fresh out of

Academy like Dalton. But…she was Dalton. She got away with an awful lot of things nobody else could.

“Dalton…” Starbuck began.

“Aw, please, Daddy,” Dalton said, cocking her hip and staring at Starbuck. “Don’t tell me you don’t have a bet on this fight.” Apollo shot a glance at Starbuck, but the Warrior grew uncomfortable and quickly glanced away.

“Did you bet I’d win, or that he’d kill me?” Apollo demanded.

“You could read my mind and find out,” Starbuck pointed out.

“I could.”

“Well?” Starbuck asked.

“I don’t think I want to know,” Apollo snapped.

“Ah, an awful lot of faith you have in me, old friend,” Starbuck said archly, then glanced around at the crowd before glaring at his daughter again. “Well, since Dalton has blown the lid off this thing, we’d better get started. If it’s on TransVid, it’s a sure bet that either Sheba or Athena will be here soon.”

“Probably both of them,” Troy agreed.

Apollo looked down into the arena, and saw Gar’Tokk waiting for him clad in the garb of a Nomen warrior.

“I’d rather face him,” Apollo said.

“You’re in luck,” Starbuck said, a small smile on his lips.

“Don’t get killed,” Dalton said, and touched her first two fingers to her forehead and chest, the salute of a Warrior.

“Thank you, Ensign,” Apollo replied. “That particular strategy hadn’t occurred to me.”

Apollo couldn’t breathe.

Gar’Tokk snarled. “Stop struggling, Apollo. Give yourself up to the inevitable and your death will be less painful. Once you are dead, life will begin again for my people.”

“You…” Apollo began, and grunted. “You talk as if you’re not…human.”

“We are Nomen!” the bestial man roared.

His voice echoed in an arena that had fallen silent. Apollo had a sudden image of Starbuck in his head, and absurdly, found a moment to hope that the gambling man had bet on Gar’Tokk to win this thing.

The Nomen were, like all humans, descended from the original home planet, Parnassus. When it became clear that Parnassus was going to destroy itself, most of the humans migrated to a planet called Kobol. Later, the diverse tribes of Kobol would populate a dozen planets in a single system of the Cyranus nebula, one of which was Caprica. But the Nomen had arrived on Caprica millennia earlier, after the initial exodus from Parnassus. When the Kobollian refugees arrived to set up the Twelve Colonies, they found the Nomen there, already a disappearing breed. With their faith in the teachings of their ancient leader, Borellus, the Nomen eschewed technology and believed only in nature and the innate abilities of their race, which had now diverged so far from the human model that they could probably be considered a human sub-species now.

And that was much of the problem.

They didn't believe they were human. In fact, the Nomen despised humanity without reservation, and believed themselves to be far superior in every way. The Nomen were incredible warriors to whom honor meant everything. Apollo had thought that if he could best Gar'Tokk in battle, the Nomen would have to realize that humans were not as inferior as they had believed. That they would turn their intensity to more productive pursuits that would, in the end, benefit themselves and the fleet as well. Now, Apollo just wanted air.

He could feel the rage bubbling up inside him. It was uncontrollable: Rage at himself for being drawn into something so foolish—he had a duty to the fleet, after all. Rage at Gar'Tokk for being so fracking intractable. Rage at the voice of fear that whispered in his ear, though he, of all people, knew that a certain peace awaited him beyond the veil of death. But today was not going to be the day Apollo died.

He stopped trying to break Gar'Tokk's grip around his body. Instead, he reached out and grabbed the matted mane on the Noman's head and forced him to look up. Forced him to meet the eyes of the man he was trying to crush to death.

And, staring into Gar'Tokk's eyes, Apollo shouted. Not with his mouth, for he had no air. No—Apollo shouted in his mind.

LET ME GO!

Gar'Tokk roared in pain. Released his grip. Clapped his hands to the sides of his head as if he'd come down with a sudden case of brain crystals.

Apollo saw that there was blood leaking from both of Gar'Tokk's nostrils, and he knew he had not hit the Nomen leader there.

So he did it now.

Apollo moved in quickly, in a smooth motion he had learned many yahren ago at Academy, and practiced as part of a daily routing in all the intervening time. Warriors rarely needed to fight hand to hand, and few were proficient in those skills. But Apollo had learned combat techniques at Academy, and then later, with the help of his father and the storehouse of knowledge in his father's Sanctuary, he had learned how to *fight*. He had learned speed and momentum and he'd had a full education in pain: how to suffer it silently, and how to inflict it.

Gar'Tokk was much more powerful than he was, and Apollo had made an almost fatal error by letting him get too close. But once was enough. And now that he was free…

The heel of Apollo's hand shattered Gar'Tokk's huge, ribbed nose and even more blood poured from the Nomen leader's nostrils. Gar'Tokk roared, eyes wide, and reached for Apollo again. Those huge hands would crush him for certain, if he let them. Apollo slid sideways, almost as though he were dancing with the huge beast of a man.

Apollo's hand whipped forward, an attacking serpent, and his rigid fingers punched Gar'Tokk's throat. The Noman gasped but didn't react this time. His right fist lashed out, and Apollo moved once more but could not evade the blow entirely. Gar'Tokk's fist clipped Apollo's temple, and he stumbled.

Had the blow landed full force, he knew, he would be dead already. Gar'Tokk came for him, seeing that Apollo was off balance. He was confident of his ability to kill Apollo, and rightly so. But to do that, he would have to get his hands on the commander again.

Apollo grabbed hold of Gar'Tokk's right hand as he sidestepped once more. Gar'Tokk thought it was an attempt to pull him down, and he turned quickly to attack. Apollo lifted his arm, lashed out with a boot and kicked Gar'Tokk twice, hard, in the vulnerable area under his thick arm. Before Gar'Tokk could react, Apollo held that arm out straight, and kicked again.

His boot shattered Gar'Tokk's elbow, breaking the Noman's arm at the joint. Gar'Tokk roared in pain, but Apollo did not let go. Injured, his opponent would likely be twice as savage. Instead, he pulled in close to

Gar'Tokk and began to pummel him. Face. Chest. Shoulder. Broken arm. Gar'Tokk went down.

The arena erupted with thunderous approval and a chorus of cries for the Noman's blood…for his death. Gar'Tokk looked up as Apollo came at him again, and he saw in the Noman's eyes that he expected to be killed. He had lost. He was about to die.

Or so he thought.

Apollo stood a safe distance from him and crouched with the fingers of his right hand splayed on the ground in front of him. He was ready to spring out of the way if Gar'Tokk had the energy to continue. But from looking at him, Apollo wasn't even certain Gar'Tokk was going to stay conscious.

"I am the victor," he said, and only now did the pain from his splintered ribs begin to spike through his body.

"Not until I am dead," Gar'Tokk wheezed.

"Then there will not be a victor," Apollo replied. "You have your code of honor, and the Colonial fleet has its own. And in our code of honor, the code of honor passed down from Parnassus, the planet both of our ancestors shared, through Kobol and to Caprica, where we both were born…in that code of honor, a man does not take the life of an enemy who can no longer fight back."

"You shame me," Gar'Tokk snarled painfully.

Apollo hung his head. "Don't you realize? There is no shame in defeat in honorable combat. There is only shame in dishonor. Your future is in my hands now, your destiny is left to me. But I realize now that the Borellian Nomen were never a part of this fleet. Never accepted any role within it except malcontent. And as long as that remains true, your people will probably live and die on the prison ship.

"So I leave it to you. You may choose to stay, or choose to go. Determine your own destiny."

Apollo stood and began to walk back toward where Starbuck and Troy waited for him. He heard a shout, and glanced toward the entrance to the arena, where Athena had just come in with an entire squadron of Warriors, lasers drawn.

Athena saw him. Her mouth moved and she seemed to be screaming his name, but he could not hear her over the roar of the crowd. His sister lifted her laser and fired at him.

Past him.

Laser fire buzzed over his shoulder and Apollo spun to see a Noman warrior stopped in mid-charge by the laser blast. It caught the huge, dark-furred warrior in the chest, and the Noman went down hard. Then Apollo looked past the fallen warrior to where he had left Gar'Tokk, broken and bleeding.

With thunderous cries of war audible even over the cacophony of the crowd, the seven remaining Nomen warriors were beating their leader to death. Gar'Tokk's eyes were open, but he wasn't even fighting back as his own people kicked at his wounds, at his head, at any soft spot they could find.

Their gazes locked again, and Apollo saw the resignation there, as if Gar'Tokk somehow believed that this was what he deserved. And in that moment, their minds met as well, and Apollo understood.

Defeated.

Gar'Tokk had been defeated. And this was his punishment. He accepted it as a matter of honor, just as those who had once followed him were now going to kill him out of honor.

Apollo felt nauseous.

You fool! he thought, projecting the thoughts into Gar'Tokk's mind, though with less ferocity than before. *You don't have to die! I've just given you the keys to your life! Tell them that! You've won your greatest desire! Fight back! There is no honor in murder, no honor in surrendering to an undeserved death*.

Gar'Tokk closed his eyes. For the briefest of moments, Apollo thought he sensed a spark in Gar'Tokk's mind—a moment of rebellion. A moment of understanding as he realized that he did not want to die. Then it was gone.

"No!" Apollo shouted.

He waded into the Nomen and began to attack them with his bare hands. Starbuck, Troy, Athena and the Warriors she had brought with her were in the battle only microns later.

But Apollo feared they were already too late.

Gar'Tokk's eyes flickered open and he grunted in pain.

The first face he saw was that of Commander Apollo. Instantly, he remembered his defeat. His crushing shame.

"Why am I still alive?" he asked.

Apollo gestured behind him, to a pretty blonde woman Gar'Tokk had never seen before. "Cassiopeia's an excellent med-tech," the Commander explained. "She healed your wounds and repaired your arm as easily as she sealed the ribs you broke for me."

"Why am I still alive?" Gar'Tokk demanded for the second time.

"You didn't deserve to die," Apollo replied, his face grim.

"You saved me?" Gar'Tokk inquired.

Apollo only nodded. "The others are back on the *Icarus*," he said.

"Though once we reach a habitable planet, you'll all be free to leave the fleet and begin a new colony, as I vowed."

Gar'Tokk winced, though from Apollo's words or some pain even he could not be quite sure.

"They will never leave without me, whether alive or dead as they decide."

"I told you," Apollo said slowly, "you can leave as soon as we find a habitable planet."

"I cannot leave," Gar'Tokk explained, and stared at Apollo with disdain, wondering how a man with so much power, even a human, could be so dimwitted. "You saved my life," he said. "Though you shamed me by sparing my life at first, you prevented them from killing me. I am now in your debt and your service.

"It is a matter of honor."

"I release you from any debt," Apollo insisted. "Truly. You owe me nothing. Take your people, begin again."

Gar'Tokk only stared at him.

Apollo stared back.

Finally, Gar'Tokk spoke. "You will not leave here without me," he said.

"Honor demands that I safeguard your life just as you have done for me. From this moment on, your safety is my responsibility." Apollo said nothing, and Gar'Tokk was relieved. There was nothing more to say. His duty to Apollo disgusted him, but honor demanded it. As long as Gar'Tokk lived, he would see to it that no harm came to Commander Apollo of the Battlestar *Galactica*.

Apollo stepped onto the bridge of the *Galactica* and, as always, was met with all the appropriate gestures of respect that befit his role as commander. But each word or sign was passed with a wary eye, this time. A stunned

numbness as the crew of the battlestar felt the presence of Gar'Tokk on the bridge.

His dark robes were clean, his fur-like hair and beard groomed, and he stood tall. But each member of the crew knew what he had done. However, many of the fleet's citizens had done horrible things under the influence of Count Iblis' evil, and so perhaps that might be overlooked. But they had all seen the fight aboard the *Ligeia* via Trans Vid, or at least heard a great deal about it.

Their thoughts were nearly written in the air, so powerful that Apollo could not avoid plucking them out of the astral winds. They wanted to know how Gar'Tokk could be in the same room with Apollo without trying to kill him. And how Apollo could turn his back on the Noman without fear of reprisal.

He felt their questions. Heard them in his head. And understood them perfectly. But he responded to none of it. Instead, he mounted the command platform, glanced at Omega, and then looked expectantly to Athena for a progress report.

Athena stared at Gar'Tokk far more openly than any of the crew.

"Commander," his sister said aloud.

But in his mind, she asked, *Am I having a brain frizzort, or isn't that the savage who tried to kill you? No, scratch that. You're the mindwipe in this room*.

"Colonel, status report, please," Apollo replied. And then: *Trank it, Athena. I know what I'm doing. I can see what you're doing! What is* Gar'Tokk *doing? Here? On the bridge*? she shot back.

He's my bodyguard.

Brother and sister were lost in their mental communication a moment. Athena had been exercising her psi powers, but it had taken Apollo ten yahren to reach the point he was at, and it would take her quite some time as well. Most of their mental communication was his doing, but some of it was on her part as well. And now, instead of direct thoughts, they let their feelings wash over one another. Her confusion and frustration; his pacifying calm and reassurance.

"Commander Apollo!" Omega snapped. "Colonel Athena!" Annoyed, Apollo glanced over at Omega. "What is it?" The tall, elderly officer smiled broadly, an uncommon expression for a very serious man.

“We’ve found it, Commander,” Omega said. “Scanners have just picked up our objective.”

Apollo turned to stare out at the starfield, Athena at his side. Everything else was, for the moment, forgotten. It would be centari before they could see anything but stars, but already his heart raced with anticipation.

In their last conflict with the Cylons, they had acquired an ancient holographic map of the Cyranus nebula. With the coordinates for Kobol, which Adama had discovered many yahren earlier, they had been able to plot out the locations of a number of other planets scattered across this quadrant of the galaxy. These were the planets to which emigrants from Kobol had traveled and, if legend and history were to be believed, had set up colonies.

Immediately, they had set a course for the nearest of those planets. And now they had found it.

“Omega,” Apollo said. “Set a course for the Xerik system.”

Chapter Two

THE *TANTALUS* SWEPT ALONG at the center of the Colonial fleet's drag field, barely using any power for its own propulsion. That was a luxury shared by several of the vessels closest to the fleet's core, all of which were primarily cultural or entertainment ships. Over the yahren the *Tantalus* had gone through several identities, but during what was now known as "the peacetime"—the six yahren during which the Colonials had not encountered a single Cylon—its residents had finally struck upon a formula that turned it into one of the most popular tourist ships in the fleet.

Other than its bridge and the living quarters of its crew and residents, the *Tantalus* was nothing more than a series of restaurants, stacked one upon or beside the next. Whatever food was desired, the whole of Colonial cuisine was available in one or another of them. Shuttles arrived and departed the *Tantalus* every quarter centon, and even more frequently during peak dining hours.

President Tigh had been coming to the *Tantalus* with some frequency for more than a yahren, even though his taste in food ran toward the comfortable rather than the exotic. Still, he enjoyed the aromas of the ship, the bustle of its staff, and the contact it gave him with citizens of the fleet that he would never otherwise meet.

Yes, visiting the *Tantalus* gave Tigh a great deal of pleasure. But at present, he had too much on his mind to enjoy even the sweetest of distractions.

"You've hardly touched your coneth stew, Mr. President."

"Hmm?" Tigh glanced up, realized he'd been drifting, and smiled self deprecatingly at Major Sheba.

"I'm sorry," he replied. "I'm a bit of a mindwipe at the moment." Sheba nodded, her smile gentle and understanding. Tigh felt at home with her, though they had not always gotten along. Indeed, their growing friendship, or camaraderie, would have seemed odd if it weren't for the fact that she was also a member of the fleet's ruling Council of Twelve, often referred to as the Quorum.

"Have a tankard of grog," Sheba suggested.

Tigh smiled. “Oh, that would help,” he said sarcastically. Which made Sheba laugh. Sarcasm was not Tigh’s forte, but he managed occasionally.

“Well, it isn’t as though you don’t have a lot on your mind at the moment,” Sheba allowed. “But it is pretty exciting, don’t you think? I mean, a human colony! A true, ancient human civilization completely untouched by Cylon hostilities. The possibilities are incredible.” The President ran a hand over the rough scrub of his thin white hair, inhaled and let it out in a huff. “You’re right,” he admitted, “but that isn’t what’s got me so distracted.”

He saw the change in Sheba’s face as she realized what, or whom, he was referring to, and wished he hadn’t brought it up at all. The Great Traitor’s presence on the fleet was a sore point for so many citizens, particularly the Warriors and diplomats, and yet others seemed to have no trouble accepting it. Tigh wanted to be sick each time the thought occurred to him.

“Well, well…” Sheba muttered.

Tigh glanced at her, saw the dark disdain on her features and followed the path of her gaze until he realized what it was she was staring at with such contempt.

“Speak of the devil,” Tigh said.

“Literally,” Sheba replied. “But look who’s with him.” Narrowing his eyes, Tigh wished he wasn’t so afraid to have the optical enhancement that Cassiopeia had recommended time and again. It would help his vision, of that he was certain, but Cassie had claimed it would do so much more for him.

Then the focus of his vision cleared for a moment, and Tigh got a good look at the woman with *him*. His heart stopped a moment, and a barrier of sheer paranoia sprang up around him. Paranoia, and horror.

“Baltar,” he whispered.

The name tasted filthy on his tongue. But what disturbed him even more was the identity of the woman who was, even as he watched, sitting down to dine with the greatest traitor in the history of the human race.

“What is she thinking?” Tigh asked, almost to himself.

“An excellent question,” Sheba replied. “And one we’ll have to ask Siress Kiera during the next Quorum session. Not only is it repulsive, but I’m sure that the gossip is already circulating about what a member of the

Council of Twelve would be doing at dinner on the *Tantalus* with Baltar." Tigh smoldered.

"Certainly Baltar has been going out of his way to ingratiate himself with anyone who'll listen, but this is…" Sheba continued, until Tigh interrupted her by standing abruptly, knocking his chair over with a loud and very conspicuous thump.

"Unacceptable. That's what it is," he declared, and though he had not raised his deep voice, his obvious aggravation had already drawn a great deal of attention.

Tigh didn't care. Nor did he pay any attention when, as he began to stride across the restaurant toward the table at which Baltar and Siress Kiera were seated, Sheba signaled the servitor to bring her a drink. As he approached the table, Tigh became more and more agitated. It was not only unseemly of Siress Kiera to have brought Baltar here, but a fundamental breach of the *intent* of their punishment of the man. Simply because he was free to go about the fleet now that they had implanted a tracebomb—a tracking and termination system—in his chest, did not mean that he ought to be enjoying himself.

Certainly, Baltar had bent over backward to cooperate with the Quorum. He had answered every question regarding the Cylons that had been posed to him, and enough of what he said correlated with information acquired by Captain Starbuck on Cylon biology that they were forced to believe him. As much as they could ever believe Baltar. And as part of that cooperation, he had escaped imprisonment aboard the *Icarus*, at least for the moment.

But he walked free at the sufferance of the Quorum and its President.

"Well, well, President Tigh, what a pleasant surprise," Baltar said loudly. "Won't you join us?"

"I think not," Tigh growled, and then ignored Baltar completely. "Siress Kiera, could I have a word with you?"

Kiera looked up a bit sheepishly. Tigh knew she would not have expected to see him here—what were the chances?—and now that she had, it was obvious that she knew how her actions would be regarded. And yet, after a moment her discomfort seemed to disappear and a kind of anger rolled across her features. She stared at him, unsmiling.

"If you hadn't noticed, I'm about to have my dinner, President Tigh," the attractive older woman replied. "I'll be more than happy to discuss whatever is on your mind at the Quorum meeting tomorrow." Tigh felt a

muscle near his left eye twitch. His nostrils flared and he kept his temper only by a great force of will.

“Now,” he said, low and even.

Then he stood back to allow Siress Kiera to stand, and after a moment, the woman did. He gestured that she should move toward the restaurant’s exit, and she did so. When they had moved away from the lounge where diners awaited a free table, he touched her arm.

“What is the meaning of this, Tigh?” she demanded. Tigh frowned, shook his head and put a hand to his temple as if she were causing him pain. Which wasn’t far from the truth.

“If you are trying to shift the focus of this conversation Kiera, you’re going to be unsuccessful,” he told her. “I will give you the honor and courtesy you deserve as a member of the Quorum—and in doing so, refrain from questioning your sanity or intelligence…”

Siress Kiera’s eyes bulged and she gasped at the brusqueness of Tigh’s words. She opened her mouth to defend herself, but Tigh would not allow it.

“But I expect that you will also give me the honor and courtesy that my position as President of the Quorum demands,” he continued. “I expect you to explain yourself.”

They stared at one another in silence for several moments. Tigh felt a tightness in his chest and a bit of an ache in his jaw because his teeth were grinding together. Siress Kiera seemed to be searching her mind for something to say, but then her eyes flashed with anger.

“I do not have to explain myself to you, Tigh,” she snapped. “Baltar is free to move about the fleet now that he has that tracebomb implant—which, as you may recall—I objected to as a wholly inhuman form of punishment.

“He is a pariah among his own people. I thought, at the very least, that someone should show him the tiniest bit of human decency,” she fumed. Tigh stared at her, brow furrowed as he tried to determine if, indeed, she had lost her mind.

“Kiera, you are talking about the Great Traitor, a man who was willing to sacrifice the entire human race for his own lust for power,” Tigh sneered through gritted teeth. “You are talking about the man who is directly responsible for the state of our lives, for the destruction of the Colonies and the loss of millions of human lives.”

The Siress rolled her eyes and glanced away from Tigh as though his words were an insult to her intelligence.

“The Cylons destroyed the Colonies,” she said. “Not Baltar.”

“Yes!” Tigh shouted, drawing the attention of several people just inside the restaurant who were waiting to be seated. He quieted down. ‘Yes,” he repeated, “but Baltar orchestrated a false peace initiative that led us into a trap, and then he betrayed us all. He worked with the Cylons to set us up for that slaughter, and then spent eighteen yahren aiding them in their attempt to track down our fleet—what little is left of the human race—to destroy us all.

“My God, Kiera, surely you remember that day. You’re old enough that you ought to remember it very well,” Tigh said, shaking his head.

“I do!” she snapped. “I lost my husband and my daughter on that day, President Tigh. And where were you?”

“Instead of defending the Colonies, I was on the *Galactica* of course. Thanks to Baltar, we were too far away to stop the Cylon attack, and I never even got a chance to say goodbye to my family. Yes, Kiera, I lost my family as well. Much of our generation was widowed by that one day. Commander Adama lost his wife that day as well. The blood of my wife and sons is on Baltar’s hands!”

“Baltar was as much in the dark as any of us,” she said. “You’re a fool, Tigh. So blinded by your own pain—pain a generation old—that you can’t see it. He was a victim, just like the rest of us. Once the Cylons had betrayed his trust, he knew what would be thought of him. He ran—and became their prisoner. He cooperated for all these yahren to keep himself alive. What else could he have done?”

It was difficult for Tigh to identify the emotion that swept through him with mounting intensity as Siress Kiera spoke. At first he thought it was merely horror. But no, that wasn’t quite it.

“What’s more,” she continued, “despite the fact that he is universally reviled by the citizens of the fleet, he has answered every question posed to him, provided information about the Cylons that he would never have given us if he were their ally. He has suffered the hatred and the humiliation heaped upon him with what I would describe as simple dignity.

“And you,” she spat, her lip curling in distaste, “you cannot allow him to enjoy a single meal? You are the monster here, *President* Tigh.” Somewhere, chimes rang, signaling the passing of another centon. The

smell of something spicy and exotic, perhaps an Aquarian bova-ranfara hot salad, Tigh thought momentarily. He remembered his meal, recalled that he had left Sheba sitting by herself. Tried to think of anything but the words he had just heard coming from Siress Kiera's mouth.

Then he identified, at last, the feeling that had overcome him. That even now was rising up through him like bile, so fast that he nearly choked on the emotion.

Dread.

This was an intelligent woman, a diplomat of extraordinary experience and skill. Yet Baltar had somehow convinced her, in their supposedly limited contact, that he was the victim of grave injustice, rather than the greatest human enemy their race had ever spawned.

Tigh stared into Kiera's face and saw there the hopelessness of any attempt to dissuade her from these views. With that, his dread deepened. For if Baltar had convinced Kiera of this, how simple would it be for him to begin to win over others.

"Go back to your dinner," Tigh said angrily. "But we will address this during our next session. It is improper conduct, in my view, and I will move that the Quorum censure you harshly."

Kiera began to speak again, but Tigh couldn't stand to hear another word. He turned and stalked back into the restaurant's dining room. When he spotted Baltar, the cowardly traitor lifted a glass of ambrosa and grinned. Tigh veered from his course and stormed over to the table before Kiera could reach it.

"Certain I can't interest you in a glass of…"

"Silence," Tigh snapped, and Baltar raised his right eyebrow, the edge of his mouth lifting in slight amusement. "I'm going to say this once, Baltar, and I hope you realize that with me, once is all you get. I don't know what you're trying to pull here, but if you want to redeem yourself, you'll have to work at it until the day you die. And on that day, it will be decided by those left behind whether or not you made up for the things you've done.

"As far as I'm concerned, you'll spend eternity making up for it.

"And I'll tell you this: you can't rewrite history. I know what you did. Even if you convince every other person in this fleet that you are not at fault, I will still be here to accuse you, to stand and call you 'traitor.' I promise you that."

"Tigh," Baltar said, eyes open wide as though he'd had his feelings hurt.

“You wound me.”

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure, if you were capable of being wounded in that way,” Tigh said. “For the moment, I’ll advise you to be careful of the lies you spread. It would be a simple thing to put you in a cell on the *Icarus*, maybe with some of the men who never knew their parents thanks to you, and aren’t as law-abiding as the rest of us.” Kiera had come up and now she ran a hand through her silver hair and glanced nervously away. Only when Tigh had begun to move away did she return to her seat at the table. She glared after him as Baltar poured her a glass of ambrosa.

Tigh felt like throwing up.

When he dropped into his chair across from Sheba, his coneth stew had grown quite cold indeed.

“What’s going on?” Sheba asked.

Tigh met her gaze. “Baltar,” he said. And that was all. After a moment, he began to eat the stew.

They all wanted to be pilots.

Boomer stood behind the control board in a large testing center aboard the *Academia*, and looked out over the frenzied forms of more than two hundred first-yahren cadets. The center was dark, the only light coming from the control board and the opaque helms each of the cadets wore. The center had been specifically designed to train pilots, with chairs the same as those inside a Viper, complete with navi-hilts. The Tri-Vid info-scroll inside the cadets’ helms offered realistic representations of combat situations.

It was an imperfect process. Just because a cadet had talent in the test chair, didn’t mean she or he would be able to act correctly or fearlessly in space. No matter how real the test seemed, it was not, and they knew it. On the other hand, those who failed in the test chair were obviously not cut out to be pilots.

Boomer scanned the green-lit figures and checked the control board. Half a centari and the test would be over. The results, he could already tell, were going to be disappointing, not only for the many cadets who would fail, but for the Academy in general. They badly needed Viper pilots. It occurred to him that the standards might have to be lowered, just this once. The pilot ranks were depleted already and this batch of cadets had two more years before they completed Academy training, at the least.

“Test complete,” a digital voice informed him.

“Lights,” Boomer said.

The cadets were removing their helms even as the lights came up slowly. He saw the range of emotions on their faces. Some were ecstatic, obviously confident that they had passed. Others had faces so twisted by despair that Boomer was tempted to let them take the test again. But he was always tempted. And the pilot's final exam was only given once.

"Thank you very much, cadets," he said to the men and women who stood expectantly before him. "I'm sure you'll all enjoy your three-day furlon. I know I will. When you return, the results of your final will be available. As you know, those who pass will move into pilot training next session. The rest of you will have the option of training for Council Security positions, or continuing your Warrior training for infantry or crew positions.

"At the beginning of next session, we'll also choose cadet squad commanders, so some of you will get your first taste of being an officer," Boomer said.

That brightened them all up. There was no test to be an cadet squad commander, just the instincts of the Academy instructors. Boomer and Sheba had gotten together with the other instructors already, and the CSCs had been determined days earlier. But no need to tell the cadets that.

"Dismissed," he said with a kind smile.

"Uh, Major Boomer?"

Boomer looked up. "Yes, what is it…Cadet Freyja?" He was pleased he remembered the girl's name. She couldn't have been more than sixteen yahren, a bit young for a first session cadet, but not nearly so young as Starbuck's daughter Dalton had been. Freyja was a pretty, dark-skinned Leonid who was very popular, particularly among the other female cadets. A natural leader, and someone that the instructors had already singled out as a CSC, come next session.

"Major, is it really true, what they're saying," Cadet Freyja asked.

"About the Xerik system? Do you think that we're going to find a colony—a human colony—there?"

Boomer smiled. It was on all their minds, he knew. It was on his own mind as well. Perhaps, he thought, he should give them all the test again in a few days. He imagined it hadn't been easy for them to concentrate, knowing what was happening in and around the fleet. After all, most of the cadets under his tutelage had never even set foot on a planet. They'd been born in space, and never had leave to make a planetary visit.

“What do I think?” Boomer asked. “Well, everything we know indicates that there was once a colony on that planet. It would have been founded about the same time, or actually a while before, the twelve colonies that we all come from.

“But whether that colony still survives? That’s impossible to guess. I’m sure we all hope so,” he said. “I know I do.”

“If…” Freyja began, but faltered.

“Cadet?”

“If it’s there, Major,” she said hesitantly, “will we stay?” Boomer exhaled loudly. “Good question, Freyja, and one I don’t have an answer to. But I’ll bet we’ll know an awful lot more about it at first cycle.” The cadets moved out of the center quickly after that. It was halfway through second cycle and no doubt they wanted to get started on enjoying the few days furlon they had. Probably none of them would sleep during light cycle that night.

And with the news that Boomer had received from Phaedra the night before, he didn’t think he’d be getting much sleep either. Hollow, slapping applause began at the back of the center, and Boomer looked up quickly, and smiled at the arrival of an old friend.

“Thank you, thank you,” Boomer said, bowing to the applause. “Jolly, you really know how to make a Major feel loved.”

The portly Lieutenant bellowed laughter. “Not too well loved, I hope Boomer. You are my superior officer, after all.”

Boomer joined in the laughter and walked down the aisle to meet Jolly. They fell into step next to one another.

“How’s Guinn?” Boomer asked, clapping a hand on the other man’s back.

“Harping on me about my weight again,” Jolly said, scandalized. “Can you imagine? What about Phaedra? She still trying to figure out what to wear to Apollo and Sheba’s Seal ceremony?”

Boomer smirked. “You have no idea,” he said, and wouldn’t meet Jolly’s gaze.

“Believe me, I know how it can…” Jolly began, but his words trailed off as he stopped short and studied Boomer more closely. “Wait a minute. What’s with that look? I know that—

“Phaedra? She’s…?” Jolly said, open-mouthed.

The expression on Boomer’s face was all the answer Jolly needed. The big man whooped and lifted Boomer off the ground in a firm embrace, swung him around.

“Yes!” he cried. “I’m an uncle!”

“Ssssh!” Boomer hissed. “And put me down! That’s an order, Lieutenant!”

Jolly dropped Boomer to his feet, and the two of them grinned like little boys.

“Listen, Jolly,” Boomer said, as they started out again. “Don’t say anything at the party, okay? I’m not passing out the fumarellos just yet. Phaedra wants to wait a while before we share the news with everyone else. She’s already going to be mad at me for telling you.”

“You didn’t tell me,” Jolly said proudly. “I’m just the naturally suspicious type. But no problem. I won’t tell a soul until you do.” They stepped into the ascensior and waited as it swiftly lifted them to the launch bay of the *Academia*.

“Thanks for filling in for Sheba today,” Boomer said.

“Any time,” Jolly replied. “So, what did you get for Dalton?” Boomer stared at him.

“Boom?”

“Oh boy,” Boomer muttered. “Let’s hurry.” As they strode to the interfleet shuttle together, Jolly chuckled under his breath. Boomer turned to ask him what was so funny.

“Uncle Jolly,” the lieutenant said, and sighed contentedly. In a distant quadrant of the Cyranus nebula spun a dank,

mist-enshrouded planet covered in vegetation and swamp with few exceptions. Several of those exceptions were towering metallic spires that jutted from the swamps as if they were blades stabbing at the heavens. There were larger structures, round and utilitarian, but none so imposing as those spires.

In the tallest of the spires, in the chamber furthest from the murky surface of the swamp below, there was a broad chair of stone and metal on a dais raised sixteen steps above the chamber floor. Upon that chair sat a creature whose eyes burned red by nature. It wore long robes to cover the dark, green black scales beneath. It bathed regularly to keep the brackish smell of its own flesh from reminding it, too often, of its origins in the insect-ridden filth below.

“Enter,” the creature said in its own language, its voice deep and ponderous.

The being who entered was different in every way from the one upon the High Seat. The new arrival was entirely synthetic, but for the brain that sizzled inside the clear dome of its skull. It, too, was robed, as an homage to its leader, but it had very little body to speak of. This thing was not a warrior or a leader. It was a thinker.

A cogitator.

“Report,” said the creature on the High Seat.

“Your vessel is ready to depart,” the cogitator replied, its voice lively, almost amused. “We only await your presence.”

“Instruct the captain that we will depart immediately.”

“By your command, Imperious Leader,” the cogitator said gravely.

“You will, of course, accompany me, Lucifer,” the Imperious Leader added. “Your expertise in galactic affairs ought to be quite helpful.”

“You honor me, Imperious Leader,” Lucifer replied.

“Yes,” the Leader agreed. “I do.”

Then the creature on its high seat began to laugh, a horrible sound not often heard on a planet of swamps and insects, where the creatures of the mud had risen to become the scourge of the galaxy. It was a destiny none but the darkest of gods could have conceived for the planet Cylon. It was a destiny that, in the mind of the Cylon Imperious Leader, had yet to be completely fulfilled.

But the Imperious Leader could wait. Time was its ally. Time, and hatred.

Chapter Three

SO, WHAT AM I THINKING NOW?

You're wondering what we'll find when we reach Xerik-5. Sorry, brother, but this time you're wrong. Weren't you the one who told me that telepathy is never guesswork?

All right, you win. I'm distracted…let's see…ah, you're wondering what Troy got Dalton for her novayahren, and…

"Athena!" Apollo snapped, half a smile on his face as he feigned embarrassment.

His sister began to laugh. "Well, she's turning eighteen, after all. And Troy's little fling with that Sagittarian actress didn't work out very well, did it?"

"Actress?" Apollo asked. "Troy told me she was a librarian."

"That was her first cycle job, Apollo," Athena said with a smirk.

"During light cycle, she was an actress. He probably didn't tell you because he was afraid what you would think."

"He's his own man, Athena. Troy wouldn't worry about that."

"You're still his father, Apollo," she reminded him. They both stood and glanced around the Sanctuary. It was the center of the *Galactica* in many ways, and yet only the two of them knew it even existed. The Sanctuary had been built into the ship when it was first constructed hundreds of yahren earlier, as a place of power, of spirituality, and focus for the commander.

It was done with the intent that the commander would always be someone of Kobollian blood, descended from the Lords of Kobol themselves. Their father, Adama, had been one such man. Apollo and Athena were also pureblooded Caprican, which meant they had the potential to access certain latent human talents that others would never imagine possible.

Apollo was commander now. But Athena was his second, his colonel, and his sister. He had believed she had just as much right as he to the Sanctuary and all they could learn there from ancient records and the teachings of their deceased father. It had brought them closer than they had been at any time since their childhood.

Speaking of Dalton's party, we should get moving, Apollo thought. *When do you think we'll be in range for communication with the colony…if there is still a colony*? his sister asked.

"Soon. Another few centons at most," Apollo replied. "Long-range scans are one thing, but as soon as we get a close scan of the planet, we should be able to communicate with anyone down there. Providing they have comm equipment and understand ancient Kobollian. Or at least fundamental code."

"As long as they don't speak Cylon," Athena said, and Apollo could see that she was only half-joking.

"This far out," he replied, "not likely. This is all uncharted territory for us. I imagine it is for them as well."

"I hope," Athena replied.

They stepped out of the Sanctuary into Apollo's quarters. Once, they had been his father's. Now his own, and soon, he would share them with Sheba. He looked forward to that time, to taking the Seal and sharing his life and—as much as he loved his adopted son, Troy— perhaps conceiving a child with her, a child that would be theirs to raise and love together. If that's what Sheba wanted, as well; they'd never discussed it. Indeed, there were a great many things they had never discussed.

Athena was ahead of him on the way out. The door to his quarters slid aside, and she was about to step into the hallway when a huge figure barred her way. Athena gave a small gasp, then a huff of irritation.

"Gar'Tokk," she said, glaring up at the Noman. "It's going to take me a while to get used to having you around."

"Believe me, Colonel," Gar'Tokk said evenly, "that is one thing we have in common."

Apollo smiled as Athena laughed softly and shook her head. Gar'Tokk's expression was unreadable. Whether he had meant his words to be amusing or not, Apollo was uncertain. But whatever their motivation, they were the truest of words and of sentiments. There would be a great deal for all of them to get used to in the coming days.

"I spoke to Oleta about your quarters, Gar'Tokk," Apollo told him.

"There is an empty chamber on this level, along the next corridor. She'll have it prepared for you by second cycle tomorrow. For tonight, you'll share my quarters."

Apollo caught his sister’s quick, anxious glance, and felt the alarm rising within her. With a thought, he sent his own emotions back to her, calm and confident.

“Agreed,” Gar’Tokk said, his face like stone.

“How about ‘thank you’?” Athena grumbled.

To his credit, Gar’Tokk actually seemed somewhat taken aback.

“Such things are not customary among the Nomen,” he said. “For the sake of my duty to Commander Apollo, I will attempt to be more aware of them in the future.”

Then Apollo’s enormous, hirsute bodyguard turned to him, nodded his head, and said, “Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome,” Apollo replied, forcing himself not to smile at this odd relationship of contrasts that seemed to be developing between Gar’Tokk and Athena. For some reason, she had his respect. Not that Apollo was going to argue.

“Now,” he said, “let’s get going. Troy will send us sailing on the astral winds if we’re late for Dalton’s surprise party.”

Apollo set off down the corridor. He’d expected Athena to fall into step beside him, but she hung back slightly, almost side by side with Gar’Tokk.

“You needn’t be concerned, Colonel,” Gar’Tokk said without preamble.

“No matter how it might repulse me, I am honor bound to your brother. I would die before allowing any harm to come to him, or causing any harm to befall him myself.”

“That’s good to know,” Athena said simply.

Apollo agreed.

Then Athena screamed. Apollo felt a spike of psychic pain and spun to see his sister crumbling to the ground. He knelt immediately at her side, and Gar’Tokk did the same.

“What is it?” Gar’Tokk asked coldly. “What is wrong with her?”

“Do you think I know?” Apollo snapped. “Athena! Athena, can you hear me?”

But she did not respond. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, and she began to hyperventilate. Her eyes were wide open and darted from side to side as though she were dreaming.

“Athena?” Apollo asked again.

Fighting his rising panic, Apollo delved into his sister’s mind, trying to find out what was wrong with her—trying to find her in there. What he

found—what he saw—stopped his heart, just for a moment. For in Athena's mind, a scene of horror unfolded. Sheba, Apollo's bride to be, crying in despair, shrieking in agony as something horrible tore into her body, ripped pieces of her flesh from her limbs and torso…and ate them. Now it was Apollo's turn to cry out. He fell back against the wall of the corridor and slumped to the ground, trying to erase the horrid scene from his mind. He shook his head, stared hard at Gar'Tokk, at Athena where she lay on the floor, brought himself back to reality.

Then his sister was looking at him, asking if he was all right.

"Me?" he asked, incredulous. "You're asking if I'm all right? What about you?"

Athena met his gaze for a moment, her face twisted with conflict, and then looked away. "I think so," she said. "I just…I wish I knew what that was."

Gar'Tokk stood above Apollo and offered his hand. Apollo allowed himself to be helped up, and then he did the same for Athena.

"I think I know exactly what it was," he said.

Athena watched him closely. "Clairvoyance?" she asked.

"Of a certain type," he replied. "Sheba is on board the *Galactica* right now. What you saw…what you saw isn't happening at present. It must be a prescient vision, something that…possibly…is going to happen." The off-duty officer's club, was on the top level of the battlestar, in the aft section of the ship, along with a more traditional restaurant and a small shop offering for purchase essential items which might be needed by those personnel quartered on board. By comparison to the shop and the restaurant, the aft ODOC was a grim, ill-lit sprawl of tables and chairs, and a long, wide bar made of rare katsugari wood. As drinking establishments went, it was a relatively sober place. No surprise, then, that it had been the one place Commander Adama would go to socialize with his staff and officers.

For that reason, since the small memorial that had been held there after Adama's funeral, the Aft ODOC had become a sort of meeting place for the family he had left behind. Family of blood, and of loyalty. Starbuck took a long drag from a fresh fumarello, savored the taste of the smoke, and exhaled smoothly. He'd quit several times already, but this was a special occasion after all. It was his daughter's novayahren. Once a yahren was all anyone got. And this was a special one: Eighteen. He took a long draught from a tankard of grog, then clanked the tankard to the top of the bar.

Fumarello clenched firmly between his teeth, he started across the room. Boomer and Jolly called to him and he waved, smiled to let them know he'd be over in a moment, and continued on. The ODOC was nicely decorated, and more brightly lit than usual, and it had been closed off to the other officers for the few centons that the celebration was expected to last.

Starbuck wouldn't be able to stay for the whole thing. But he'd wanted to be here to see the look on his little girl's face when she walked in. It should be a good day for her, a special day. And in order for that to happen, Starbuck knew that he had to break the ice with Dalton's mother.

"Starbuck," Cassiopeia said as he approached.

She stood up from where she'd been arranging some flowers on the table where Dalton's gifts had been laid out. It struck Starbuck then, as she looked at him expectantly, that Cassiopeia was even more beautiful than she had been two decades ago when they'd first met. Not the beauty of youth, of course. But in time he'd grown to appreciate her for her wit, her intellect, and the kindness of her heart. Those things made her shine. They were all things he saw in his daughter as well. In fact, it seemed that all Dalton had inherited from him was a sneaky sort of charm and a hot temper.

Starbuck still loved Cassie. There'd even been a moment or two half a yahren earlier when they'd entertained the idea of reuniting. That dalliance had ended badly. Now both of them knew they couldn't live together. She needed a mate who would be home when she wanted him there. Not out playing pyramid at some chancery all through light cycle, spending cubits on bad wagers or expensive bottles of ambrosa shared with women half his age.

He couldn't promise that.

When it had ended, he'd gone back to Athena. That, in itself, was a prickly proposition, but they seemed to be making it work somehow. For the moment, at least. She didn't mind whom he bought ambrosa for, as long as he slept in his own bed. Or hers.

"Hello, Cassiopeia," he said pleasantly.

"Take that disgusting weed out of your mouth," she replied, her face reflecting an odd combination of amusement, frustration, and something else he couldn't quite put his finger on.

"Sorry," he mumbled, and exhaled fumarello smoke off to one side.

"Listen, I just wanted to talk because—"

“Because today’s Dalton’s novayahren, and we ought to at least be civil for her sake,” Cassie finished for him.

Starbuck smiled. “Exactly.” He gripped the weed between his teeth once more.

“You’re right,” she said. “At this point, I can’t really keep you out of my life for much longer. We have a daughter together, and Athena and I are getting closer than we’ve ever been.”

“I…imagine that’s awkward,” Starbuck said, chastened.

“See,” Cassiopeia laughed, “right there, that’s a good sign. Even five yahren ago, Captain Starbuck would never have thought to wonder if it was uncomfortable for the women he was involved with. You’re finally growing up, Starbuck.”

“Growing old, you mean,” he grumbled.

“Happens to all of us, eventually,” Cassie replied. “But don’t worry. I’d say you still have plenty of energy. And by the way, Athena thinks so too.” She gave him a mischievous look, a naughty little twinkle in her eyes, and Starbuck gaped, scandalized.

“She…what did Athena say to you?” he demanded.

“Oh, just girl talk,” Cassie answered, and turned to continue arranging flowers.

Starbuck was going to persist, but a hand landed on his shoulder, and he turned quickly to find Troy there looking anxious.

“What’s taking so long?” Troy asked. “I mean, Dalton’s not here yet. My father and Aunt Athena haven’t shown up. What are we going to do?” Starbuck looked at him. Lieutenant Troy was, for all intents and purposes, his nephew. He was a good kid, passionate and intelligent. But sometimes, he was a little too much like his father, Apollo.

“She’ll be here, Troy,” Starbuck replied. “As far as Apollo is concerned, I’m sure he and Athena got caught up in some Quorum business or something. The next few centons could be the most important time in the history of our race. If they’re late, you can shout at them later.” Troy nodded. “You’re right,” he agreed.

Starbuck smiled. No matter how Troy might avoid the subject of any romantic entanglement between himself and Dalton, Starbuck could see how much he doted on the girl. And Dalton was so obviously smitten with him. It was only a matter of time, he thought.

“Hey,” Troy said suddenly, “why are you in uniform?”

“I wish I wasn’t,” Starbuck admitted. “I could use a little furlon. Unfortunately…”

“Unfortunately, we’ve got recon in fifteen centari.” Troy and Starbuck both turned to see that Sheba, also in uniform, had finally joined them. Starbuck smiled at her. He loved the feel of the bova leather Viper pilot’s jacket he wore, and the dark brown uniform beneath. But the outfit looked better on Sheba. Starbuck loved women in uniform. Of course, Starbuck loved women in general. He had a soft spot for Sheba, and looked forward to the day she and Apollo took the Seal. Troy kissed her. “Hello, Sheba. I… I guess I didn’t bother to check duty rosters before I scheduled this.”

“Well, if Dalton would get here quickly enough…” Sheba began, but she was quickly shushed by Boomer’s wife, Phaedra, who hurried into the ODOC and motioned for everyone to be silent.

Half a centon after her arrival, ten centari after Starbuck and Sheba left for recon patrol—late—and a few moments after Apollo and Athena had finally arrived, Dalton stalked the floor of the Aft ODOC, tracking the perpetrator of this surprise.

“You’re in big trouble, *Boxey*,” she whispered in his ear.

“Dalton,” he warned. “How many times do I have to tell you…”

“Boxey, Boxey, Boxey,” she taunted.

Troy began to chase her, inciting the rest of the party guests to fits of giggles. None of them—not Boomer nor Jolly, not Athena nor Cassiopeia, not the other pilots he and Dalton were friendly with, and certainly not his father—could have gotten away with that, and none of them would have dared.

But Dalton was fearless.

“Boxey, Boxey, Boxey,” she teased again.

At last, he caught her, bullied her a bit, and everyone went back to their celebration. When the attention had been diverted from them a bit, Troy took her hand.

“Come here,” he said quietly.

She followed him further into the ODOC, back into the area where the servitors kept their stock. Her heart beat faster just being near him, alone. Dalton had loved Troy since she was a little girl. But there was love, and then there was *this*. And whatever this was, she wanted more of it. But no matter how many times she dropped hints, or even made blatant comments,

he put her off. For a woman with a temper like hers, Dalton thought she'd been very understanding.

But her understanding was only going to last so long.

He gazed into her eyes—probably having no idea the effect it had on her, or so she thought—and smiled.

"I got something for your novayahren," he said. "It's just a little thing, a trinket really, but I hope you like it."

He reached inside his tunic and withdrew a small box. When he opened it, she gasped. Inside was a thin strand of oregg, a bracelet, and along its center a trio of bright green gemstones.

"It was my mother's," he said, looking everywhere but at her face, as if he feared she wouldn't like it. "Father let me go through all of Serena's things several yahren ago; most of it was packed away. I saved a few things, though, to remember her by…but I want you to have this." Dalton stared at him, searching his eyes, wondering if he had any idea what he was saying. What he was doing. This wasn't the kind of gift you gave to a friend. Some part of him must realize that, but she wondered how truly cognizant of it he was.

"Thank you, Troy," she said, clasping the bracelet around her wrist.

"It's very sweet of you. It…it means a lot to me." He glanced away, then. Emotion surged inside Dalton, her heart and mind coming together for once. She was angry, she was frustrated, she adored him with her whole being.

Dalton closed the space between them, reached up and grabbed the back of his head and pulled him down to her.

"Dalton?" Troy asked as her lips met his.

"Shut up." Dalton kissed him fiercely, deeply, tugged the hair at the back of his head and ran her nails along the nape of his neck. Troy hesitated at first, but after a moment, he gave in. She sensed relief washing over him, and then it hit her as well. Her kisses softened, grew more tender, and a smile spread across her face. They leaned their foreheads together, the tips of their noses touching.

"Dalton, I…"

"Shut up."

Her smile was so wide it was almost painful. Troy gave a little laugh and smiled in return. He reached out and brushed the tips of his fingers

across her cheek, gazing at Dalton as though he had never seen her before. *At last*, Dalton thought.

At last.

Sheba had split off from Starbuck after their first centon on recon patrol. Their Vipers traveled well ahead of the battlestar. So far, they'd had no communications with the colony they hoped to find on Xerik-5, but Sheba felt strongly that it would be there. They'd come too far, dreamed too much, to meet with disappointment yet again. After all these yahren, she thought, they finally might have found a place to rest. A home for those who did not want to continue.

Home. What a beautiful sounding word. Sheba could never have thought of her quarters aboard the *Galactica* as home, whether she took the Seal with Apollo or not. They hadn't set a date yet, but it would be soon. They both wanted it, and until they married, Sheba knew she would feel as though she were waiting for the next phase of her life to begin. Even though very little would actually change.

She would live in the commander's quarters. That would change. gut there was something about it, some tiny loss of personal power, of identity, that disturbed her. Still, that was a small price to pay for the future that she and Apollo would build together.

Sheba scanned the info-stream on the shimmering interior of her helm. No new information about the Xerik system, but they were coming up on it fast now. It wouldn't be long at all before the entire Colonial fleet would sail into the system.

She wondered how far off Starbuck had wandered. They had agreed that they would each travel as far as the orbit of the system's outermost planet, and then return to the *Galactica*. Now she thought there might not be time to get that far before turning back. Still, she yearned for some kind of communication, some kind of confirmation that there was human life on Xerik-5. So she kept on, hoping to return to the fleet with a ray of hope. Hoping to…

Blip.

Sheba stared down at her Viper's cockpit scanners, even as she simultaneously checked her helm's info-stream. It took some getting used to, using both information sources, but she was capable of doing both. A ship. There was a ship…no, two ships, moving in a vector that would shortly bring them into contact with her. Sheba's heart raced. She'd known

that this would be it, had dreamed of that first contact, that moment when the branches of the human race, separated from one another for millennia, would finally be reunited. And here was that moment.

The Viper's scanners quickly configured a holo-projection of the approaching ships, which blossomed from the console a micron later. The smile disappeared from Sheba's face, even as the new ships approached, faster than a Viper. She'd have visual soon. But she didn't need visual, wasn't even sure she wanted it given the appearance of the ships on holo. They were hideous things, like some kind of perverse combination of starship and sea monster—in fact, it reminded her a great deal of the kraken, large many tendriled beasts found in the oceans of Sagittarius, in the days when anything still lived on Sagittarius.

Still, despite its outward appearance, there was no way to know how another branch of humanity might have developed over the yahren. It was possible that there were great oceans on Xerik-5, and their culture might be sea-based. She knew she had to try.

"Computer," she said. "Hail approaching vessels in standard Kobollian and fundamental code."

"Begin," the computer instructed.

"This is Major Sheba of the Battlestar *Galactica"* she announced. "I represent the Colonial fleet. Unknown vessels, please identify yourselves." At first there was no response. Then an alarm began to sound inside the cockpit. Sheba held her breath. Scanners indicated that the approaching vessels' systems had shown an energy spike, which could mean they were preparing to attack.

"Computer, repeat message!" she snapped.

The vessels then came into visual range…which meant they were close enough to attack. They were coming fast, and with no response, Sheba had no choice. She gripped the navi-hilt, and tilted it left, the ship surging forward as her pulsars flared.

The alien craft did not turn to intercept, or even to pursue. Sheba breathed a sigh of relief. Not hostile after all, she thought. Then the thick tails that seemed to curl down and under each of the ships began to move, changing position as if they were…

"By the Lords," she whispered. "They're tracking me!" The alien ships' tails glowed red at their tips, and Sheba began frenetically to attempt

evasive maneuvers. But the ships had spread out now, the long tails swaying, following her.

Targeting.

Firing.

Three arcs of red plasma burned across the vacuum of space toward Sheba's Viper. She had a moment of horrible understanding when she knew that she could not avoid them. A moment when she knew that she would never marry Apollo. A moment when she knew that she was about to die.

One of the plasma bursts passed over the Viper's canopy and Sheba shielded her eyes at its brilliance. Then, impact. A double jolt at odd angles, one shearing off her left wing and the other melting her pulsar systems to saligium slag. The gyro-capacitor blew instantly. All internal power shorted even as the Viper began to spin forward in a sickening roll. Backup power was barely enough to keep the alarms blaring in her ears. Something wet ran in a tiny rivulet down Sheba's forehead. She tried to reach for it with her left hand, but couldn't feel that hand anymore. Her right hand moved at her command, but then, through a fog of disorientation, she realized that she was wearing her helm. She wouldn't be able to touch her face. She blinked instead, and through her right eye all she saw was tainted red.

She smelled her own blood.

One of the Viper's alarms warned her that the ship was venting support vapors into space. Soon, she'd have no air. But Sheba wasn't really worried about it. She couldn't concentrate enough to worry too much about anything.

"Apollo," she whispered, her eyelids heavy, flickering. Closing.

She tried to force her eyes open, but her oxygen was running out. Sheba's Viper continued to roll forward, dead and adrift in space. A moment later, she lost the capacity to hear anything at all. Sheba felt was a great sense of relief as she let go and slipped down into darkness.

Chapter Four

THE OUTPOST THE SKY HAD BUILT on the third moon of Xerik-12 had been completely obliterated. The fires that had burned for centons had now been reduced to smoldering embers and thin, wispy smoke that dissipated quickly. Half a kilon from the edge of the shattered embassy, over a tall ridge of sharp, spiny outcroppings, Valor of the Sky finally regained consciousness.

Instantly, his mind set about mapping his location, telepathically feeling his surroundings, as well as his physical condition. Valor's left wing had been badly burned and there were several long scratches along his back that had bled and were now crusted and dry. They would be healing by now, and he probed the wounds with his mind to be certain there was no infection.

His armor was shattered. Completely torn away over the left wing where it had suffered a direct hit, the bottom of the armor was in shreds from skimming the lunar surface on emergency landing. But the top, at Valor's back, that was the worst. The armor had become shrapnel after a tangential blast from a Chitain craft. It had been the one that sent him careening down through the lunar atmosphere. During the crash, the shrapnel had torn into his flesh.

Valor was injured and exhausted, but he knew he would be all right. If he could extricate himself from his armor. And with that thought, Valor of the Sky began to know fear intimately.

For he could not fly while dragging the armor as dead weight, not across vast distances of space. And the armor would not open. Not to his mental commands, nor to the gentle probing of his pseudopods. If Valor could not free himself, he would die on this cold moon. Much better, he thought, to have died in the battle itself. That was a noble death and this… this was…

Unacceptable! he psi-screamed.

Focusing all of his telekinetic strength on the mechanism that would open the armor, he found that it had been melted together, sealed by a Chitain blast. Pseudopods snaked out at the front of Valor's body, what he thought of as his face, thought it wasn't a face by any standards a humanoid would recognize.

Mind and body together, he forced himself against the blast-welded seal. Centari slipped by. The scratches on his back began to bleed again, green ichor slipping down and across his wings. For just the barest glimmer of a micron, the thought of giving up began to enter his mind, and once again, Valor rebelled against the very idea of it. He surged forward again. There was a loud crack, which he perceived only as vibration, and the armor shrieked open halfway…and stopped there. It was too damaged to open completely, but it would be enough. With utmost caution, Valor began to slide from the armor. His mind projected a thin sheath of telekinetic force around his body to protect it from the shards of his armor that jutted from the ravaged mess; and then he was free. For several microns, Valor merely lay stretched out on the rocky lunar surface; his shining gray flesh, the wide flat wings that comprised most of his body, soaked up the stellar radiance. Then he reached out with his mind, searching for his brothers, for the other Sky who had been posted to this embassy. Only recently arrived himself, he did not know how many Sky were there, all told. Perhaps one hundred.

Now, there was only silence. And for the Sky, death was a silent mind. Valor wanted to sleep. To rest. But there would be no rest for him now, not for some time. He had a message to deliver.

A message of war.

Valor psionically lifted himself from the ground and began to propel himself forward. Slowly, gradually, conserving as much energy as he could manage, Valor began to fly. Up through the thin atmosphere of the third moon of Xerik-12 he soared and banked, coming ‘round to the heading he felt best to escape the light gravity of the satellite.

It was a simple enough thing for him to reach out into the void and get his bearings. Navigation was easy for one who could touch the stars with his mind, who sensed the flow of the solar winds, the infinitesimal yet inexorable forces that moved planets in their orbits, which held the universe together and apart.

He broke from the moon’s pull then, and turned into a heading that would lead him on the path toward home. Without the armor’s engines to help him when he needed to rest, Valor was forced to rely only on the strength of his mind to propel and protect him. But in space there was no gravity to hold him back. In microns, Valor was traveling at a speed many starships would never reach. Still, it would be long days before he would reach the DarAvqq system, before he would reach *home*. But when he did,

the Chitain would pay for their treachery. They would pay for the silent minds Valor had left behind.

Plutarch was a genius. Of that, Cassiopeia had no doubt. But there was more to him that mere intelligence. The scientist was quiet, almost reserved, but there was something incredibly magnetic that smoldered just beneath that quiet surface.

Relax, Cassie, he's hardly more than a boy, she chided herself. But that was the problem, of course. Plutarch might be only a few yahren older than her own daughter, but he was much, much more than a boy. Her cheeks were flushed merely thinking about him, and she found herself terribly embarrassed—so much so that she forced herself to pause just outside Plutarch's lab.

She loved Starbuck.

He was with Athena again, now, but that didn't change the fact that she loved him. On the other hand, she'd been in and out of other relationships over the yahren, and always come back to Starbuck. Cassiopeia gave a small chuckle, shook her head, and sighed. A schoolgirl crush, she told herself. That's all it was.

Cassie knew she was right. But that didn't mean that she was going to lie to herself. Was she attracted to Plutarch? Oh, yes.

Suddenly, the door irised open behind her; starting with a circular opening at the center, the circle widened until only the open passageway remained. Plutarch was holding some odd mechanical object in his hands, staring intently at it, and nearly knocked her down as he walked out of the lab.

"Hello!" Cassie said, startling the young scientist. Plutarch started, dropped whatever it was he was working on, but recovered just in time to catch it before it crashed to the floor.

"Oh!" he said. "That was close. I'm such an oaf." Then, as Cassiopeia was thinking how amazing it was for a man twenty-two yahren old to use the word *oaf* in casual conversation without feeling foolish, Plutarch looked up and smiled at her.

"Cassiopeia," he said. "I was just going out to use the comm to contact you. What brings you to the *Virgon Star V*

He was just slightly taller than Cassie, and relatively slender. His hair was shorn to a centimetron or so, and spiked up on his head. The smile was

gone already, replaced by an inquisitive look that she had come to realize was his most common expression.

” *You* do,” she replied. “Or, I should say, I came to see how you were faring, now that we’ve deciphered most of the data from that infosphere.”

“Excellent,” Plutarch replied. “That’s why I wanted to contact you. Come into the lab. I have something you’re going to want to see.” The scientist turned, then, and moved back into his laboratory. As he walked, his hands fluttered out at irregular intervals to move a beaker here or straighten a saligium rack there. Cassiopeia followed, watching him and laughing softly at herself. She had a crush, of course. Completely harmless, and not something she would ever act upon, but it made one thing obvious to her.

If Starbuck had really decided to settle down with Athena, and she had decided that she was willing to have him, in spite of his many faults, then Cassiopeia was going to have to open her eyes and look around. Plutarch had done her a favor in getting her to notice a man besides Starbuck. And now that she had, she was going to make it a point to notice a lot more of them. Cassie didn’t *need* a man. Never had. Before she had become a med-tech, Cassiopeia had been trained as a socialator, and though there was a certain glamour to that life, it was a lonely one.

It would be nice to have someone to talk to in the dark when she couldn’t sleep during light cycle, or to share a cup of Aries tea with when she woke. Sure, he was cute, but there was no way that Plutarch was going to be that man.

And Starbuck apparently didn’t want the job.

“Cassiopeia?”

“Hmm? Oh, I’m sorry,” she told Plutarch, who was watching her expectantly from in front of a narrow door. “What was it you wanted to show me?”

Plutarch smiled again. Twice in one centon had to be a record of some kind, Cassiopeia thought.

“This,” he said, and placed his hand over a sensor pad next to the door. It slid open. The breath caught in Cassie’s throat as the first glimpse degt shining metal was revealed. She stumbled backward, confused and frightened, tripped over something hard and fell to the floor, her elbow painfully striking the floor. Beyond the door was a Cylon, the red light of awareness sweeping back and forth across its visor.

“My God,” Cassiopeia gasped. “Plutarch, what…Lords, what have you done?”

Plutarch only smiled.

“Centurion,” he said mildly, “help Cassiopeia up, if you please.” The red light shot back and forth across its helm.

“By your command,” it replied, its metallic voice, so close, the most chilling thing she had ever heard.

The Cylon started to move after her, and Cassie scrambled backward, trying to escape. Her mind reeled with horror. Somehow, Plutarch was a traitor. Somehow he had…

“Cassiopeia wait!” the scientist cried. “It’s not what you think. It’s… Centurion, halt!”

“By your command,” it said, and froze in place.

Plutarch rushed after her. “It isn’t real,” he said. “I’m sorry if I frightened you I just wanted it to be a surprise. It’s everything we could have hoped for and more, don’t you see?”

The pleading in his voice was what made her stop reacting and start thinking. She stared at him, then at the Cylon. The electronic eye continued its motion, but the sense that it was aware of her had disappeared. It was frozen in place. Eerie, but little more than that. Embarrassed, she rose quickly and brushed herself off, reminding herself that Plutarch was young and not really used to social interaction. She forgave him, but any attraction she might have felt toward him was gone. She glowered at Plutarch, who fidgeted uncomfortably.

“All right,” Cassiopeia said, taking a deep breath. “Well done. So you’ve built some kind of remote Cylon drone based on the specs from that infosphere. Excellent. A new toy for the children’s center. I’m sure Teal will be pleased.”

She turned angrily and began to move toward the door.

“No, wait,” Plutarch begged. He caught up with her and lightly held her arm. “Please?”

Cassiopeia turned, scanned the chaos of the lab and wondered how he’d found the time for building toys while he was performing experiments and studying Cylon biology.

“You were right about it being a drone,” he said. “You know the Cylons built a lot of drones of their own, to add to their military capacity during the height of the war between Cylon and the Colonies.

“But you were wrong, also,” Plutarch said, already beaming at his own brilliance. “The information in the infosphere was invaluable, Cassiopeia. Thanks to that data, I made this drone, but it isn’t remote.” She stared at him. “You mean it has its own intelligence?”

“Of a sort,” he replied. “I followed the programming patterns the Cylons themselves used, but with certain valuable changes.”

Cassiopeia shook her head in amazement, then she began to laugh.

“Congratulations, kid,” she said. “You’ve built yourself a Cylon.” Apollo rode the ascensior in silence. He was pleased to be alone, if only for a few microns. The excitement of the past few centons had seemingly affected everyone in the fleet, or at least, everyone aboard the *Galactica*. Everywhere he went, he was instantly surrounded by people breathlessly awaiting the next word, some clue as to what they would find when they reached the Xerik system.

And though Gar’Tokk certainly was an effective bodyguard, having him around at all times had already grown somewhat overwhelming. Granted, he was far less obtrusive than Apollo would have imagined, hut still…he was pleased he had managed to slip away without the Noman realizing he had gone.

Light cycle had begun more that two centons ago, but he didn’t think anybody was thinking about sleep. He certainly wasn’t. He knew that Major Gahan, who was bridge operations controller when Omega was off duty, would be surprised to see him. Perhaps even slightly taken aback—after all, he was used to having the ship to himself over light cycle—but there was no way Apollo was going to be able to sleep. Not when they were so close.

The ascensior door opened to an empty corridor. Apollo stepped out and started along the gangway that led to the bridge. The running lights were dimmed slightly during light cycle, and he liked it that way. It was quite peaceful, actually. He knew that his father had frequently spent time on the bridge then, for the tranquility of it.

Apollo smiled.

The bridge door irised open and Apollo stepped through, and stopped. Stared. Then began to laugh the gentle laugh that Sheba always said made his face crinkle just so. He didn’t know about that, but he knew she almost always kissed him when he laughed.

“Commander!” Omega said. “Are you on duty, tonight?” Apollo shook his head, looked at Omega, then at Athena, who sat in his chair on the

command platform.

“He’s not on duty, Omega,” Athena said. “Not any more than I am, or you are.”

She began to stand, but Apollo motioned for her to stay seated. He glanced around and saw Major Gahan in the navigator’s seat. Rigel was in the launch coordinator’s chair as always. Apollo saw at least eight officers there who were not on duty. In the half light of the *Galactica’s* bridge, Commander Apollo smiled at his crew and turned to stare out at the starfield, searching for the Xerik system; searching for an ancient branch of the tree of human evolution, maybe even a clue as to the path of the Thirteenth Tribe.

Searching for home.

“I hope you all know there won’t be any excuses for missing your shifts tomorrow,” he said with a grin.

Low chuckles all around.

Apollo stepped up onto the command platform and stood beside his sister, a hand on her shoulder.

“So, Colonel,” he said softly, “any luck?”

“Nothing so far, Commander,” she replied. “But if they have any comm systems at all, it will have to be soon. Scanners have picked out at least eleven planets in the Xerik system, most of which have at least one moon. We should have the outermost planet on visual in a few centari.” Apollo squeezed Athena’s shoulder. He bent down and kissed the top of her head, then whispered in her ear. “I only wish Father were here,” he said.

“Oh,” she replied with a smile of wonder, “I think he is.” The sudden hiss of the bridge door drew their attention, and Apollo looked up to see Starbuck stroll in.

“Now isn’t this a cozy little sight,” Starbuck said. “Telling ghost stories are we?”

“You’re nearly a centon late coming off recon,” Athena said, a mixture of annoyance and concern in her voice.

Starbuck rolled his eyes. “You think *I’m* late?” he said, and walked over to the launch controller’s chair.

“Rigel,” he said, “any word from Sheba yet?” Apollo stood up straight, eyes narrowed. “What?” he snapped. Rigel glanced at him, then at Starbuck, and finally it was Apollo he looked at as he answered Starbuck’s question.

“No, sir,” the older man replied. “Major Sheba hasn’t reported in since both of you first dropped off scanner. That was more than four centons ago.”

“And I last had contact with her more than two centons ago,” Starbuck said.

When Apollo saw the look of concern on Starbuck’s face, it made him realize just how serious Sheba’s lateness was. She was the essence of a Colonial Warrior. Which was why she was one of the Academy’s most respected proctors. Apollo didn’t think she’d returned late from recon more than once or twice since he’d known her, and never anywhere near as late as this.

“Who’s on recon now?” he asked quickly, planning to begin a search for Sheba immediately.

Rigel opened his mouth to respond, but Omega interrupted.

“Commander, we have unknown craft on scanner!” the Bridge Officer barked. “One extremely large, and two others—both warships according to initial scans. They’re not in range yet, unless they have a weapon we’re not familiar with, but energy spikes indicate they’re preparing to attack.”

“Launch a Viper squadron, now!” Apollo snapped. “Omega, give me comm, narrow beam, and let’s see if we can’t find out who we’re dealing with!”

“Go ahead, Commander,” Omega replied.

As the ship began to awaken around him, klaxons sounding and sending a squadron of pilots running for their starfighters, Apollo took a deep breath. If these ships were intent upon attacking the fleet, they would take a nasty hit to begin with. But one free shot was all they were going to get.

“Attention, approaching vessels, please identify yourselves!” he demanded. “I repeat, this is Commander Apollo of the Battlestar *Galactica*, please identify yourselves immediately.” Silence on the bridge.

Over the comm, he could hear something. Voices. Whispering, though so low that Apollo couldn’t tell what language they were speaking. He focused his mind quickly, and began to reach out toward the oncoming ships. It was possible he could stop them, he thought. Communicate with them in that way, even if they did not understand even fundamental code. Apollo sensed alarm from Omega, and glanced quickly over at the Bridge Officer. “What is it?” he snapped.

“Commander, it’s…” Omega began, and let his words trail off before looking up again and meeting Apollo’s eye.

“It’s a battlestar,” the man said.

Apollo’s eyes went wide. But it was Athena who said what he was thinking. She stood suddenly and began to stride toward Omega.

“That’s impossible!” she said.

Then the comm crackled. Athena froze. Apollo stared at the comm console and a hologram sprouted up from it, taking on the form of a white-haired man with a wide smile on his face.

“Well, well, well, Apollo,” the old man said gruffly. “You’ve finally made commander. I’m proud of you, boy.”

Athena only stared. Apollo was so surprised he could barely speak, but he did manage to get out the man’s name.

“Commander Cain?”

Boomer lay in bed, watching his wife sleep. Phaedra breathed evenly, her eyes moving beneath their lids. She was dreaming, and though Boomer had never been what his fellow Warriors might laughingly call a romantic, he wondered what his bride was dreaming. He wondered if she was dreaming about the child just beginning to grow in her belly. Phaedra looked so peaceful. And who could blame her? The new quarters, separate from the main pilots’ quarters, were dark and quiet. Which had a lot to do with why Boomer was still awake in the middle of light cycle. He’d grown so used to the constant noise of the pilots’ quarters that he found the calm of his new surroundings oddly distracting. But he’d get used to it.

There were a lot of things he had been enjoying getting used to in the months since he and Phaedra had taken the Seal. Their marriage had stunned all but Boomer’s closest friends, and even they had been a bit surprised by the speed with which Boomer and Phaedra entered into that most sacred pact. They had been a couple for just over a yahren, but with his duties as a Warrior and as a proctor at Academy, Boomer knew the biggest question had been the one only Starbuck had been blunt enough to ask.

“Congratulations, Boomer,” he’d said. “But where did *you* find time to fall in love?”

Truth was, Boomer didn’t have an answer. But laying there in the dark and watching Phaedra sleep, the gentle rise and fall of her chest, he knew that it had happened. Somewhere in the chaos that was his life, he had

found himself loving her. And once he had that love, he moved swiftly to be certain that nothing would stand in its way.

Now, two months after their marriage, Phaedra was already with child. It was all happening very fast, but Boomer was absurdly pleased. He had never known it, but this…marriage, family…this was what he had waited his whole life for. To be a husband and a father, and to be a Viper pilot and a proctor as well? How could any one guy be so lucky?

And the fleet itself was healthier than ever. Despite the pilots they'd lost, many of whom had been Boomer's friends or former students, they'd made significant advances in fleet security and Viper technology thanks to the recent resumption of the conflict between the Colonials and the Cylons. Though Colonial techs had yet to perfect a QSE generator with enough capacity to quantum shift a starship the size of the *Galactica*, they had equipped five Vipers with the stolen Cylon technology, and were working to manufacture more QSE generators as fast as they were able. Yeah, Boomer thought. The only way things could be better, in his estimation, was if there really did turn out to be human beings on Xerik-5. It made his head spin to think about what might come of that. A colony? A home base? Maybe even a permanent settlement. A lot of people would have to make hard decisions then, and Boomer was no exception. With a child on the way, he couldn't just think of himself and his obligations to the Colonial military. It would be a wondrous thing for his child to be able to grow up on a planet, instead of wandering the galaxy.

A dilemma, true, Boomer thought. But it would be a fantastic dilemma to be caught up in.

With dreams of Leonis, the home planet he would never see again, and idle fantasies of Xerik-5, swirling about his head, Boomer finally began to drift off into sweet slumber. His eyes closed and he felt the warm breath of his one true love on his face.

Bamm! Bamtn! Bantm!

"What the…?" Boomer snapped awake, sat up, and was already out of bed and headed for the door before Phaedra began to stir.

"Boomer, what's going on?" she asked sleepily.

"That's what I'd like to know!" he growled. "I haven't heard any alarms. But somebody's gonna get their pogees toasted in pulsar backdraft in about two microns!"

He reached for a long robe and wrapped it around his body even as he slammed the sensor plate next to the door. It slid aside, and Boomer stared at a sweating, panting Jolly, who stood in the corridor in full uniform with a look of utter desperation on his face.

“Lords, Jolly,” he said, “it’s the middle of the night!” But already his anger was losing its momentum. He knew something was wrong, even before Jolly caught his breath enough to respond.

“Jolly?” Phaedra called from further back in the bedroom.

“Boom,” Jolly panted. “It’s…Sheba. She…didn’t come back…from patrol.”

The heavyset lieutenant hadn’t finished his statement before Boomer turned and strode back into his quarters. He went to a wide closet and pulled out his dark brown pilot’s uniform.

“Who’s out there now?” he asked.

“Captain Hecate’s entire squadron is looking for her,” Jolly informed him, finally having caught his breath. “Two of her people are on recon currently, but I thought that you and I should…”

“Absolutely,” Boomer agreed, his mind racing, ticking off a long list of things that could have gone wrong for Sheba.

It wasn’t as if she would have run out of fuel.

“What about Apollo and Starbuck?” Boomer asked. “Are they coming?” When Jolly didn’t answer, Boomer turned to stare at him. Jolly’s lips formed a wide ‘o’ of surprise. Boomer slipped on his crimson flight jacket and raised his eyebrows.

“What?” he asked. “Are they coming or aren’t they?”

“Sorry,” Jolly replied. “It never occurred to me that you wouldn’t know. I mean, Apollo announced it over unicomm.”

“Announced what?” Boomer demanded, growing frustrated. “Jolly, spit it out!”

Jolly smiled, then, an expression totally incongruous to the moment, and the gravity of the multitude of things that Sheba’s disappearance could indicate.

“We’ve made contact, Boomer,” Jolly said simply. It was Phaedra who said, “What? With the colony on Xerik-5?”

“Not quite,” Jolly replied, still smiling. “The *Galactica* is in contact with their flagship, though. Their President is on board, and Apollo, Athena, and Starbuck are on their way by shuttle even as we speak.”

“Apollo and Athena both went?” Boomer asked, astonished. “I didn’t think Quorum policy would allow them both to enter potentially hostile territory.”

“Oh, I don’t think Quorum policy’s an issue,” Jolly said. “President Tigh is also with them.”

Now Boomer only stared. It didn’t make any sense, to risk the commander and his second, as well as the President of the Quorum, all at the same time.

“How…” he began to ask, but Jolly interrupted.

“It’s Cain,” Jolly said. “The alien colony’s President is Commander Cain.”

Now it was Boomer’s turn to stare open-mouthed, even as Jolly grabbed him by the arm, waved to Phaedra, and dragged him out the door into the corridor.

“Come on, Major,” Jolly said. “If we want to keep Commander Cain happy, we’d best start looking for his daughter.”

As the shuttle docked inside the landing bay of the Battlestar *Pegasus*, Apollo and Athena stood side by side in silence. No communication, verbal or telepathic, passed between them. There was nothing for them to say to one another. Apollo knew that the excitement and astonishment he felt would be echoed by his sister’s feelings. How could they not?

“Of all the things we might have expected to find…” President Tigh began, as if *he* could also read minds.

“This wasn’t even on the list,” Starbuck said, without his usual frenetic manner.

Tigh stood in front of the shuttle door, and Apollo stepped up next to him, as befitted his rank. Behind them, Athena and Starbuck stood side by side. Athena was also there by virtue of rank. Starbuck, on the other hand, was there for no reason other than the obvious. He was Starbuck. Best friend to the commander, life partner to Colonel Athena. And a familiar face, as far as Cain was concerned. It would help to have as many familiar faces as possible, while they tried to explain to Cain why it was that they couldn’t find his daughter.

And bringing up the rear, silent and grim, was Gar’Tokk. He said nothing, merely stayed with Apollo, dogging his steps as though he were on a Noman blood trail rather than the commander’s bodyguard. Apollo could

tell that Gar'Tokk's presence unnerved the others, but he had finally begun to get used to it.

The airlock hissed as it unsealed, and the door slid open, revealing the thin, white-haired old man on the other side. For the first time in nearly twenty yahren, Apollo stood face to face with the man who was to be his father-in-law.

"Commander Cain," he said, by way of greeting.

"Commander Apollo," Cain replied, then greeted the others in turn, paying careful attention to Gar'Tokk's presence, narrowing his eyes, but saying nothing. "Welcome, once more, old friends, aboard the *Pegasus*." Apollo scrutinized the old man's face as he stepped forward and they clasped hands. Cain's grip was hard, intimidating…but then the man who had been a living legend among the Colonial fleet had always been intimidating. The lines in his face had deepened with the passing years. He was bonier, more slender than he had been, and his hair was thinner. But Cain still had the cold saligium in his eyes that made him such a commanding presence.

Cain's gaze ticked over to Starbuck, and the old man's face hardened somewhat.

"Now, Captain Starbuck," he said. "As we walk, you may tell me exactly how it was that you lost my daughter."

A short time later, after Cain had been assured that all efforts were being made to locate Major Sheba—and after the old man had sent a squadron of his own Vipers out to search for her as well—they gathered in a large conference chamber with a panoramic viewport which showed the serenity of the starfield beyond. A pair of Warriors in traditional blue uniform stood on either side of the door, and Cain's second, a stern and silent man named Colonel Tacitus, stood by Cain at all times. Tigh and Cain conferred briefly, but soon enough, Apollo and the old man faced one another across a long table, and Apollo began to talk. He told Cain, in terms as succinct as possible, a bit about the long yahren that had passed since they had last seen one another. He told Cain of the time when they had thought the war with the Cylons over at last, and of Adama's passing, and of their most recent confrontation with the Cylon hordes.

"But you say that you actually had Baltar imprisoned yahren ago?" Cain asked, confused.

“For a long time, Commander,” Athena replied. “But he managed to escape and return to the Cylons.”

“True,” Starbuck agreed. “Though considering that the last time Baltar and the Cylons saw one another, they were preparing to execute him, I don’t think he’ll be making any escape attempts any time soon.”

“Indeed,” Tigh agreed. “Where would he go?”

“But how did he escape in the first place, those yahren ago?” Cain inquired. “The greatest villain in the history of our race; I assume he was under careful guard.”

“In solitary confinement in those days,” Tigh confirmed. “And that may have been our problem. He had only two wardens, rotating shifts. He apparently managed to coerce one of them—we can only assume with promises of power and wealth or some such—to free him and arrange access to a Viper.”

“I see,” Cain said thoughtfully. “And, of course, with the cooperation he is now providing, and his altered relationship with the Cylons, he isn’t likely to go running off any time soon.”

“True,” Apollo admitted. “But that might also have something to do with the fact that, if he does, the tracebomb in his body will obliterate him.”

Cain frowned and stared at Apollo as if seeing him for the very first time. Slowly, a small smile curled at the edges of the old man’s lips.

“Well, Apollo, you’ve changed a great deal since we last met,” Cain said admiringly.

Apollo did not smile in return.

“I suppose I have, Commander,” Apollo replied. “But not so much in the way that you mean. In fact, Baltar’s restraint system was Colonel Athena’s idea. Though I approved, of course.”

“Of course,” Cain said slowly. “Well, I’m sure there are a great many things we can learn from each other now that the fleet is reunited, eh? I admit I’m surprised that Adama was able to keep the fleet together all that time, and now you, of course, Apollo. It’s an extraordinary achievement.

“I’ll look forward to any information you can provide about the Cylons, or any other races, friend or enemy, you’ve run across in your travels. Also, I hope that you’ll share your new technology with us, Commander. It could be invaluable.”

Apollo blinked. “Do you mean…are there Cylons nearby?”

“Not at all, my boy,” Cain said with a chuckle. “But we’ve been building up our own fleet specifically because we’re not willing to Wait for the Cylons to attack us. As soon as we’re ready, *we’re going to take this war to them.”*

Cain’s words so stunned Apollo that for several microns he could do nothing but stare at the old man. Finally, he spoke his mind, his voice hushed with apprehension.

“I’m sorry, Cain,” he began, “do you mean to say that you have established a colony on Xerik-5—a human colony, a home for our people away from the threat of Cylon tyranny—and now you want to draw the Cylons’ attention by attacking them at the earliest opportunity?” Cain tilted his head slightly, once again regarding Apollo as if he were studying him under a micronoscope.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, Commander,” Cain replied. “Why colonize unless it is to use planetary resources to create a foundation from which to launch a counteroffensive?”

Apollo didn’t respond. Instead, he glanced over at Athena, who also stared at Cain in open dismay.

War, Apollo thought, sending the word to his sister. *It’s all he’s ever understood*.

Cain’s eyes were still locked on Apollo.

“What is it you’re not saying, Commander Apollo?” Cain asked bluntly. Apollo met his stare coldly, brows furrowed in consternation.

“Well, sir,” Apollo replied slowly, “it would have been more appropriate if she were here to tell you herself, but you should know that Sheba and I are engaged to take the Seal.”

Now it was Cain’s turn to look surprised. Cain’s turn to fall silent. After several moments had passed, the old man stood—with some help from Colonel Tacitus—and gestured for the others to do the same.

“I’m sure you have a great many questions for me as well,” Commander Cain said. “And I promise I will answer them all. The citizens of your fleet have been waiting for this for a long time, and I don’t want anyone to have to wait a single micron longer than is necessary.

“President Tigh,” he nodded to Tigh, “Commander Apollo. Colonel. Captain. I think it’s time for you to get your first look at the planet we have christened Poseidon.

“The planet which, if you so desire, you and your entire fleet may call your home.”

Chapter Five

THE SUN AROUND WHICH THE XERIK SYSTEM REVOLVED was a

yellow giant. Even at the system's outermost boundary, beyond its furthest planet, it was a brilliant flare in the distance. Troy's current trajectory placed Xerik's sun above him, increasing the ambient light of the scattered star field. The buckles of his flight jacket glinted in the increased illumination inside the Viper.

It was beautiful.

But Troy had no time to appreciate the beauty of the distant sun, nor to scan the starfield for the many planets of the system. Instead, he was focused completely on the data scrolling along the inside of his helm, and the information provided the Viper's scanners with such totality that he was able to hold his emotions at bay.

Not completely, however. He could fool his mind, but his increased heart rate and the dampness of his palms reminded him of his anxiety. His fear, and the dread that was slowly filling him and building toward genuine despair.

Sheba was more than merely a fellow Warrior and pilot. She was more to him than his father's lover. When Troy was six yahren old, his father was killed in the Cylon destruction of the Twelve Colonies. Half a yahren later, his mother died as well, leaving him in the care of her new husband, Apollo.

They were not his blood relatives—Apollo and Athena, and Adama, may the Lords hold and keep him. Not his family by birth, but they were the greatest, the most loving and noble family any boy could hope to have. Apollo was his father in every way that mattered. And Sheba was a trusted and loving friend, the closest thing he had had to a mother for nearly twenty yahren. He remembered her gentle touch on his feverish forehead when he'd fallen ill at the age of eight…recalled all the talks they'd had in those long yahren when it seemed that the teenaged "Boxey" and Apollo simply could not communicate.

Now she was gone. Troy didn't know what he would do if anything happened to Sheba. As soon as the thought entered his mind, he thrust it out

violently. It couldn’t have happened again. He wasn’t going to lose another one.

It took him a moment to realize that he was being hailed. He heard Dalton’s voice the second time she called his name over their commlink.

“I’m here,” he replied, clearing his throat after having kept silent for so long.

“How are you holding up?” she asked, and there was so much in that question that at first he didn’t know how to respond.

Dalton didn’t wait for his reply. “We’ll find her, Troy,” she promised.

“Sheba’s an extraordinary pilot. She and Boomer pretty much taught us both everything we know. She’ll be all right.”

Still, Troy didn’t respond. A few microns later, he finally voiced the question that was haunting him. “What if you’re wrong?” he asked. “What if she’s really gone. Dead?”

No answer at first from Dalton. Then, softly, she said, “I love you, Troy.” They were spread out across space in their search for Sheba. Troy didn’t even have a visual on Dalton’s Viper. Cold space separated them, and all he had of her was the crackle of her voice over the commlink. But he felt her in memory, close against him, her lips on his own, her breath warm on his throat. He felt her close to him now as if they were still locked in that embrace.

“Thank you, Dalton,” he said, not sure of what to think about the rest—about them, together. He stowed away that question for another time.

“What for?” Dalton replied. “We all do what we must, what we’re driven to. Now, let’s go find Sheba.”

Troy was about to respond in the affirmative when another voice crackled over the commlink. His communications with Dalton had been on a private channel, but the main commlink was still open to the fleet and the other Vipers searching for Sheba.

What he heard enraged him.

“Major Boomer! We’re under attack here! We could use a little help!” somebody cried over the comm. “Some kind of alien craft, weirdest looking things I’ve ever seen. And, Lords, they’re fast!”

“Who was that?” Troy asked, even as his Viper’s scanners locked on the source and he pulled up on the navi-hilt to swing up and over and reverse direction. Dalton should know. She was part of Captain Hecate’s squadron, and most of the Vipers flying right now were Hecate’s people.

“Lieutenant Toth, I think,” Dalton replied anxiously.

“I’ve got you on visual,” Troy said as he saw Dalton’s Viper fall into line with his own.

“Good,” she said. “Let’s keep an eye on each other. Don’t want to lose anyone else out here.”

Troy began to laugh, a smile starting to stretch across his features. It felt good—

—until Boomer’s voice came over the comm. “Toth? Lieutenant Toth, respond! Ensign Mayr, respond! Anybody have Toth and Mayr on visual or scanner?”

“Scanner says I’m right on top of the spot their comm signal came from,” Troy replied, watching data fly in front of his face. “But I’ve got nothing now.”

Nothing. He felt nauseous just saying the word.

“How can there be nothing?” Boomer demanded. “Even if they Were engaging an enemy, there’d have to be alien craft on scanner. Vipers don’t just disappear!”

“I’m going quantum,” Dalton declared, “to look for Cylons.” Troy was about to call to her to stop, but even as he glanced out through the canopy at her Viper, it shimmered and then disappeared, phasing out of synch with what he knew as reality.

Klaxons sounded in his cockpit. Troy snapped his head around, and didn’t even have time to check his scanners before his Viper charged through a drifting mass of debris. He was jostled around a bit, but the Viper’s shields protected it from any serious damage.

“Computer, analyze that debris now!” he snapped. He watched the flatscreen on the Viper’s console as images of individual pieces of debris flew by. In microns, he had his answer.

“Debris consists of what remains of a Colonial Viper,” the computer told him.

“Dear God,” Troy whispered.

Despite his training and discipline, he couldn’t stop from wondering whose Viper it was. Toth’s? Mayr’s? Sheba’s? He hated himself for it, but Troy hoped it belonged to one of the others, and not to the woman who had helped raise him.

“No Cylons,” Dalton announced as she QSE-jumped back into synch with the universe.

“This is Lieutenant Troy,” he said. “I’ve just flown through a cloud of debris that used to be a Viper. Computer can’t determine whose Viper it was, but I think it’s a safe bet to assume that Toth and Mayr are dead. Probably…probably Major Sheba as well. We’ve got an enemy out here hitting and running faster than any craft we’ve ever seen.” Silence on the comm. Nearly an entire centari ticked by before Boomer’s subdued voice, cold and hard, came over the comm.

“Keep looking,” he ordered. “Give it another centon, and if we haven’t found anything by then, we’ll catch up to the rest of the fleet.” *Catch up*. The fleet was headed toward Xerik-5, a planet inhabited by the first humans the wandering Colonials had seen in nearly two decades. Not only that, but the men and women on that planet were refugees from the Colonies as well, creating an unprecedented anticipation as fleet citizens wondered if some of their own family or loved ones whom they had thought lost might actually have survived, might be on the planet they were even now approaching.

It ought to have been a moment of extraordinary joy. A glorious reunion. Particularly since a large portion of the fleet’s population had long since desired a home of their own. They wanted to stop searching, to let the others move on and find Earth. All they wanted was soil beneath their shoes and a roof over their heads. Fresh air and a friendly sun shining above. A garden, perhaps. A gentle rainfall.

A home.

All of that was suddenly possible.

Troy should have been ecstatic. Instead, he felt cold and grim. Dread and despair were the only emotions he could manage at that moment. For Sheba was still missing; more than likely dead, now that they had discovered a mysterious new enemy in this system.

There was a great deal of celebrating going on aboard the *Galactica* when he returned more than a centon later. But Troy did not join in the festivities.

The Quorum convened in the early centons of first cycle the following morning. There were thirteen seats around the table: one for each of the members of the Council of Twelve, and one for any guest who might be invited to speak before the council. Today, there were two empty seats. Athena did her best to avoid looking at Sheba’s seat. The major was the council’s representative from Scorpius, just as Athena represented her own homeworld of Caprica. Tigh was the first president the people of Leonis

had ever had on the Quorum. Several of the others had been members of the Quorum since the Colonies had been destroyed and a new Quorum had to be chosen. But Sheba had been the youngest and the newest.

It was unthinkable that her seat would need to be filled again so soon. And so, for the moment at least, Athena would not think of it. They began with a disturbing discussion concerning Baltar. Though he had fulfilled his agreement with them at every turn, he also seemed to be using his freedom to try to rewrite history, to convince the people of the fleet that he had been an unwilling pawn in the Cylon betrayal that led to the destruction of the Colonies.

And Siress Kiera believed him. She had, in fact, been seen in public with him several times, allowing herself to be portrayed as the Great Traitor's friend and confidante.

President Tigh was incensed. The others were not so overt, but were clearly disturbed as well. Tigh asked the Quorum for a formal censure against Kiera.

He didn't get it.

Instead, the Quorum gave her a private reprimand her and suggested strongly that she refrain from appearing in public with Baltar in the future. Also privately, Tigh told the gathering that if Kiera ignored their concerns, Baltar would be returned to the *Icarus* and imprisoned for life, as, Tigh felt, he ought to have been in the first place, no matter what information he had to offer them about the Cylons.

Thus, the gathering was already quite uncomfortable when the subject of Sheba's disappearance was finally raised. Athena reported on the efforts to find her, and Tigh explained that Commander Cain was quite understanding, all things considered. That brought up the subject of Cain, and Athena knew that no other business would be addressed that day.

"Given the statements of Colonel Athena and President Tigh, as well as the vast and rapid changes we will no doubt be faced with in the coming days, I move that we await further developments in the disappearance of Major Sheba before considering her seat open for candidates," the Tauran representative, Sire Mikal was saying.

Athena realized she had better start paying attention.

"I second the motion," President Tigh agreed.

The motion was carried unanimously.

“I’d like to point out something that I think we’re all concerned about,” Colonel Athena said. “What now? I know that all of you are keeping your own counsel until we have heard from Commander Cain in an official capacity. Or President Cain, if you will. On Poseidon, after all, *he* is President.

“I suppose that’s my point. The people will, in time, likely determine their own destiny. I don’t think we could prevent them from doing so even if that were our duty, which it is not. But I think all of you should be considering several things in regard to Cain’s offer.

“He’s offered us a home. That’s attractive to all of us in one way or another. Personally, I think you all know where I stand. Commander Apollo and I will pursue our father’s vision until we have found Earth and the final destination of the Thirteenth Tribe.”

Athena paused then to allow the murmurs in the room to subside. There were frowns, glances that told her she was insane, but there were also several nods of affirmation, and that gave her hope.

“If Poseidon is everything that Cain says it is, there is no reason that we can’t allow citizens of the fleet to make their homes here— those who wish to. Anyone who would like to continue on the quest we began almost twenty yahren ago may choose that path also. Some of them may decide that it is simply preferable to keep moving as far away from Cylon territory as possible.

“Whatever those decisions are, we should realize that, once we land on the surface of Poseidon, as a fleet or as individuals, we will no longer represent the Quorum.”

Athena leaned back in her chair, clasped her hands on the table in front of her and exhaled.

“What are you talking about?” Siress Kiera asked haughtily, and Athena could see from the look on her face that the older woman truly did not understand.

“It isn’t our planet, Kiera,” Sire Belloch said. “That’s what the Colonel means. If we choose it as home, or the citizens of this fleet do, then we and they must accept that Cain has already established the planet’s government. He has always been a warhawk, and he will have filled Poseidon’s Quorum with those sympathetic to his militaristic fervor.” Athena stared at Belloch. She had never thought much of the pudgy Aries man with the icy blue eyes,

except perhaps that he was arrogant. But most of the Quorum were that, and worse.

“Don’t look at me like that, Athena,” Belloch said with a grin. “I may be old and I may be pompous, but I am not a fool. For the sake of our people’s safety, we must first investigate the conditions on Poseidon, and the planetary government as well. The citizens of this fleet will be allowed to make an informed decision on this subject. Then, if they decide to settle on Poseidon, we will make certain that the migration is controlled and monitored for safety.”

Sire Belloch smiled again. “See, there I go. I speak as though it is a pronouncement when you all know it is merely my opinion. Still, as my opinion, I move that we send an envoy to Poseidon to inform the fleet of their options, and that, once informed, we shuttle safely to the surface any who wish to settle.”

There was silence in the council chamber. Eyes flicked from one face to another, never resting too long.

“This was supposed to be such a glorious moment,” Sire Mikal said.

“Perhaps we’ve just been wandering too long,” President Tigh suggested. “It’s as if, in some strange way, *we* have become the lost Thirteenth Tribe. The idea of stopping now, without really having reached our goal, does seem in some ways…”

He paused. Glanced around. Apparently decided not to continue.

“Like failure,” Athena said, and knew instantly that she was right. Though most of them would want to stop, to settle, she knew that for herself, and for Tigh, and evidently for Sire Belloch as well, settling now would be tantamount to surrender.

“I second the motion,” Athena said.

Again, the decision was unanimous.

“In light of these events,” Tigh said slowly, “it seems much of our other business may have to wait until our next session. Cassiopeia reports that the scientist, Plutarch, has created a Cylon drone that responds to his commands.”

Athena glanced up sharply. She hadn’t heard about this yet. Too busy, apparently, with other matters.

“This thing is functional?” she asked.

“Yes, but I don’t see what use it might be,” Tigh replied. “Whether we settle here or move on, we have no reason to believe we’ll run into the

Cylons again. Of course we have to be cautious, but—”

“You’re wrong, actually,” Athena said.

Tigh blinked. Her statement had not been phrased with respect, and she regretted it instantly. Tigh might be like an uncle to her, but this was Quorum session, and she had to speak to him in a manner that his Presidency demanded.

“Pardon me?” Tigh asked.

“Commander Cain has made it clear that he wants to launch some kind of reprisal on the Cylons as soon as he feels his people are ready,” Athena explained. “There might be some military application for Plutarch’s ingenuity. If so, Cain’s going to want it.”

“Perhaps we should keep this to ourselves for the moment?” Sire Belloch suggested. “If Commander Cain is determined to engage the Cylons, that may very well keep many citizens from settling here at all. And, frankly, since I think such an act would be completely psychotic, I don’t see any reason to encourage him.”

There was no vote on that subject, as it was not an official motion, but the Quorum silently agreed. The idea of drawing Cylon attention to the fleet was completely horrifying to all of them. All the more reason, Athena thought, to find out what exactly was happening down on the surface of Poseidon. Exactly what kind of civilization had Cain built down there? That was the real question.

A short time later, Cain himself entered the Quorum chamber. He was courteous and charming, and gained the sympathy of the council members as they began to realize how badly his daughter’s disappearance was haunting him. After all, he had not seen her in almost twenty yahren, and now, to have her go missing just before a reunion neither of them could even have hoped for…it was a cruel twist of fate.

Athena watched as, one by one, Cain won them over—all but President Tigh, Sire Belloch, and herself, of course. But even Athena had to admit that Cain instilled within her an odd feeling she had not had since she was very young. A feeling that, given the right leadership and enough firepower, the Cylons could be defeated. A feeling of hope, and of vengeance.

It was a potent mix. But in her heart she truly believed that it would prove deadly if Cain ever got his wish and faced the Cylons directly. He seemed impossible to kill, had escaped certain death at least twice already.

But nobody lived forever.

“It was nice to see you, Nita, even under these circumstances. That arm should be fine in a day or so.”

Cassiopeia smiled at Ensign Nita, a young engineer who had been friendly with Dalton from childhood. The poor girl had suffered serious burns from a small tylium fire in her department during second cycle the day before. Cassie had done what she could to take the pain away, and then she’d treated the burns.

Already the skin cells were working overtime to repair themselves. In the meantime, synth cells would be joining the mix, combing with the actual cells to create a temporary graft until the original cells could complete their regrowth.

“Thank you so much, Cassiopeia,” Nita said, face glowing, her smile radiant. “I know that you don’t really see patients anymore, but I felt more comfortable coming to you.”

“That’s all right,” Cassie replied. “I’m just glad to get away from my research lab for a bit. It’s nice to have a short furlon.”

“Furlon requires actually not working, you know,” Ensign Nita said, raising an eyebrow. “Now I know where Dalton got her drive.” Cassiopeia laughed. “Well,” she said amiably, “it wasn’t from her father.”

Nita smiled knowingly. “Say hello to her for me?” the girl asked.

“I’ll do that,” Cassie agreed. “Whenever I get to see her. Everyone’s a little overworked right now.”

They embraced and Nita left. Cassiopeia sat on the examination berth in the anteroom of her lab area, enjoying a moment of peace, a moment when she wasn’t focused on anything at all. She reached up and rubbed some of the tension from her neck, closing her eyes.

“Would you like some help with that?”

Her eyes snapped open, and for a moment, Cassiopeia didn’t recognize that white-haired, thin man who stood before her. Wouldn’t have, in fact, if it weren’t for the fact that she had been half-expecting him. She laughed softly, pushed herself off the berth and crossed the room. He opened his arms and she went to them as though she had spent a lifetime there. As he embraced her, he made a little rumble of pleasure in his chest that she recalled with nostalgia. Though he was old, there was still power in his arms, and his back was straight and proud.

“I’d hoped you’d come to see me, Cain,” she said happily.

“My sweet Cassiopeia,” he replied, with a twinkle in his eye, “an entire phalanx of Cylon Raiders couldn’t have kept me away. I’m just happy you remember an old man who once doted on you.”

“You were more than that, Cain, and you know it. But you’re right. It was a long time ago. We’re all a lot older now,” she said. Cain smiled. “You don’t look a day older.”

“Well, maybe a day,” she said, and they chuckled together.

“This is quite a setup you have here,” he said, and indicated the room and the adjoining lab.

“A long way from my days as a socialator, you mean?”

“Now, there’s nothing wrong with being a socialator, my dear,” Cain replied. “It’s an ancient occupation with a tradition of great respect. Socialators are women of exemplary manners, diplomacy and education. They are the perfect companions.”

“Particularly when the lights are out,” Cassiopeia said bitterly. She regretted her past, though she never tried to hide it.

Cain looked at her sternly, and with some disappointment. “Maybe,” he admitted. “But being someone’s companion would never have been good enough for you, my dear. You were meant for finer things, and here you are.”

Cassie grew uncomfortable. “I’m not a doctor,” she said.

“Who needs them?” Cain snapped, wandering around the lab, eyes ablaze with wonder and appreciation. “I’m told you’re the finest med-tech in the fleet. That you’ve become the primary bio-research tech on this battlestar. That’s quite an accomplishment.”

Cassiopeia didn’t know what to say. Instead, she remained silent.

“We could use someone with your skills on Poseidon, Cassiopeia,” Cain said softly.

She looked up sharply, astounded by his words.

“What do you…Cain, I don’t know what to say.”

“Say nothing, for now,” he counseled her. “I know that you have a daughter. I can’t wait to meet her; I’m told she’s as radiant and as brilliant as her mother. And I know you wouldn’t want to leave Dalton behind. Believe me, I know how hard that can be. But a lot of people are going to be making some hard decisions in the coming cycles, and I wanted you to know that, as long as I live, wherever I am, there’s a place for you.” Cassie smiled, warmed by his words. “Thank you, Cain,” she said. “That means a

lot. You always looked out for me." Then her smile turned to a look of concern as she continued. "I'm sorry about Sheba. I know it all seems very grim right now, but she's one of the best pilots the fleet has ever had. I'm sure that she's out there somewhere. After all, how many times have we counted you out, and yet here you are? She's your daughter, Cain, through and through. And, I'm happy to say, my friend."

"Oddly enough, your Captain Starbuck said much the same thing," Cain noted. "Thank you, Cassie, I…"

He paused then, unsure of himself in a way that ill-befit a man of his courage and character. She saw the pain in his eyes, the fear that Sheba might not be coming back. And for the first time, she saw the resemblance between father and daughter that she had always said was non-existent. It was something about the eyes. A fire there, but a kind of empathy as well. Cassiopeia began to truly consider the possibility that Sheba might be dead. She moved into Cain's embrace again and reached up to trace her fingertips along the wrinkles of his face, along the lines of his pain.

"She'll be all right," she lied. "I know it." They held one another in silence for nearly a full centari. Then Cain chuckled lightly, and Cassiopeia looked up in curiosity.

"Doesn't seem like twenty yahren," Cain said, in response to her questioning gaze.

"No," Cassie agreed, breaking their embrace. "And just so you know, he hasn't been *my* Captain Starbuck in a long time." Cain raised an eyebrow and let that sink in a moment.

"About Poseidon," he began, then held up a hand to forestall any protest. "No, just listen. Only you can decide what's best for you. But the Quorum is sending a party down to Poseidon at my invitation. Ostensibly, they'll be there for diplomatic purposes. We'll throw a big welcome party for Tigh and Apollo. Truly, though, I think they just want to get the lay of the land. See how I'm running things down there.

"I'd like you to come down with them. At least do that for me," he asked tenderly.

Cassiopeia bit her lip a moment. It had never occurred to her that she would settle anywhere without Dalton, without the people who had come to be her family over the yahren. But it was such a simple request.

"You'll be my guest?" he prodded gently.

“Of course I will,” she said. “It will be my pleasure.” Apollo had slowed his breathing to a meditative state without even realizing it. His surroundings inspired meditation, though, and that was the reason he had come here in the first place. The sanctuary in his quarters, the place that had been his father’s own inner sanctum, was completely private, but he couldn’t go there because it would have placed him out of contact. Even another telepath could not have found him there. Apollo lay on an extender chair in the celestial viewing room in the uppermost reaches of the *Galactica*. Though the crew kept the battlestar looking pristine, the ship had been built centuries ago. There were areas of it that had fallen into disuse over the yahren. Sometimes these areas would be closed down, later renovated and reopened with renewed purpose. The children’s center near the pilots’ quarters was one example. But Apollo wouldn’t let anyone touch this chamber. Few people even knew it was here. In fact, it was a terrible design flaw in the battlestar. A place literally made for stellar viewing, possibly for navigation by the stars, or perhaps divination, in a time when people believed in such a thing. But it was immediately above the topside engineering area, which meant that the chamber constantly hummed with the noise of the battlestar’s engines. It didn’t bother Apollo. In fact, he found it rather soothing. The commander of Battlestar *Galactica* stared out at the serene, sublime beauty of the celestial sea and struggled with his own imperfections. Apollo was angry with himself. This anger rose from an emotion that had been overwhelming him of late. While he was thrilled to have found Poseidon, and to know that Commander Cain was alive, he was also feeling a great deal of anxiety and even selfishness when it came to the fleet.

Apollo knew that a large percentage of the fleet’s citizens were going to want to settle. How could they not? They were not privy to the full origins of the Kobollian race, nor were they capable of understanding his faith in the existence of the Thirteenth Tribe, and Earth. His father had spent yahren being as cryptic as possible, not revealing all he knew, to keep the fleet pursuing that dream.

But now they could choose Cain’s planet as home. They didn’t need Earth anymore—didn’t care about the Thirteenth Tribe.

But they’re wrong! That was what Apollo wanted to scream at the stars, to shout over the hopes and dreams of his charges. Commander Cain was a living legend, certainly. But he was a warhawk as well. War was what he

lived for. The destruction of the Colonies at Cylon hands was something he would never be able to leave unavenged.

That, in itself, was dangerous. That, in itself, was a reason not to stop here and make poseidon their home. But Apollo had so much more on his mind.

They didn’t need a small colony of humans that the Cylons could easily destroy—they’d destroyed a dozen much larger colonial worlds already, this would be nothing to them. The fleet needed a home where the native humans were already powerful. And allies far enough away that the Cylons might never find them, but strong enough that if they did, humanity would stand a chance.

But more, they needed to find the Thirteenth Tribe, to understand the nature of the Lords of the House of Kobol. Apollo had seen their craft, had even been aboard. He was destined to become one of them after he died. But that wasn’t good enough for him. He was safe, himself, of course. Death was only another stage of life for Apollo, son of Adama. But he felt with agonizing clarity that this gift should be not only for pureblooded Kobollians. It should be for all of humanity, all of the descendants of the race that began on the planet Parnassus so many millennia ago. And he believed that if he could follow the path of the Thirteenth Tribe, he might be able, somehow, to achieve that. That was his quest; not the fleet’s mission, but Apollo’s. The search for Earth, however, was another issue. And after reflection, he had to admit that it wasn’t just Earth. Poseidon simply did not have enough people, enough protection, enough history. It wasn’t far enough away from Cylon territory.

And there were some very disturbing questions that Apollo planned to raise, questions he was determined to get answers to. Like what happened to the original colonists? That was the biggest one to start with. According to the records Starbuck had recovered from the Cylons, the early emigrants from Kobol had settled a number of Colonies, including Earth, long before the Twelve Colonies from which Apollo hailed. One of those colonies had been on Xerik-5.

So where were they? Why had that civilization failed? Had the Thirteenth Tribe been here, and if so, why did they move on? Where did they move on to?

All important questions.

However, as Apollo lay staring up at the stars, a more immediate question—a question that had been haunting him for some time— eclipsed all the others in his mind.

Where was Sheba?

And what had attacked the Vipers that had been searching for her? He had asked Cain about that, and received little more than a shrug and a raised eyebrow. Neither of which was sufficient answer, as far as Apollo was concerned. If Cain's people had been here for yahren now, if they had been patrolling the system, they had to know of any threats in the area.

But Cain had been unresponsive. The old man had not actually denied that there were hostile races in the quadrant, merely ignored the question. And his own daughter was the first to go missing!

Apollo pushed that thought away. He couldn't imagine even someone as driven as Cain would ignore the well-being of his own child to maintain some elusive mystery. But with the woman with whom he planned to take the Seal missing, probably dead, Apollo was not in the mindset to be judicious in his suspicions.

Cain was hiding something.

Apollo expected that when he and the others went down to the surface of Poseidon, he would find out what that something was.

In the shadowy chamber, illuminated only by celestial light, Apollo sensed something. The atmosphere in the room had changed. He was no longer alone.

"What is it, Gar'Tokk?" he asked calmly.

Apollo sensed the Noman's hesitation and surprise. He turned, leaned into the light and smiled. Gar'Tokk had come up through the hatch into the observation area of the small chamber, and he could barely stand without bumping his head on the low ceiling above.

"Don't worry," Apollo said. "You're not growing careless. I'm just very difficult to sneak up on."

Gar'Tokk's eyes narrowed, as if he were trying to determine whether or not Apollo had insulted him somehow. After a moment he seemed *to* decide that there had been no insult, nor did he take offense "at the implication that he had been trying to catch Apollo unaware. Of course he had not. But the Borellian Nomen were known for their natural stealth as hunters, and Gar'Tokk had been noticeably unnerved by the fact that Apollo had sensed his approach.

Good, Apollo thought. It wouldn't do to have Gar'Tokk begin to wonder how Apollo had beaten him in the first place.

"You are late, Commander," Gar'Tokk said, his voice a gritty rumble.

"The shuttle was scheduled to depart five centari ago. Colonel Athena will be concerned if you are absent too long."

Apollo raised his eyebrows, tilted his head to study Gar'Tokk. He reached out with his mind but sensed no duplicity in the Noman. Not that he'd expected it. If the Nomen were anything, it was brutally honest.

"Why do you look at me like that?" Gar'Tokk asked, irritated.

"We haven't spoken much about the new role you've taken on, Gar'Tokk," Apollo began.

"There is nothing to say."

"But there is," Apollo argued. "We've outlined the parameters, discussed your own privacy as well as mine. But we haven't addressed the one thing that I think we need to.

"You've appointed yourself my bodyguard. Yet the way in which this came about must have left you with a certain amount of anger toward me," Apollo stated calmly. "It isn't the most comfortable arrangement, is it?"

Gar'Tokk stared at Apollo as if he were insane.

"What has comfort to do with it?" Gar'Tokk asked, quite sincerely. "As to anger, I bear you no malice, Commander. Why should I? You triumphed over me in fair combat. You spared my life. It is my duty to stand by you, now, and give you the same gift of life that you gave to me.

"Is it *pleasant* duty?" the Noman asked, hairy brow furrowing with distaste. "No, it is not. But it is my duty. My discontent has nothing to do with you, nor will it affect my ability to perform that duty. To allow such a thing to happen would bring me only greater dishonor." Apollo nodded, eyes locked on Gar'Tokk's. He understood, at last.

"Now, we must go," Gar'Tokk urged.

"Athena will let us know if we're late," he told the Noman. Gar'Tokk looked at him with interest, but Apollo did not elaborate on just how he expected Athena to contact them.

"You are troubled," Gar'Tokk observed. "Your mate's disappearance?" Once again, the Noman had surprised Apollo. Why ask after his welfare, particularly his mental state, if he despised the man he had sworn to protect?

Apollo's response surprised them both.

“That’s part of it,” he admitted. “Frack, how could it not be? But it’s more than that. All of this…it’s what many of the fleet’s citizens have dreamed of for so long. But I have a horrible feeling of dread. A premonition, of sorts, I suppose.”

“Should you not warn the fleet then? As Commander?” Gar’Tokk asked, studying Apollo closely.

Apollo shook his head. “No. I have nothing to base that foreboding on. Nothing but Sheba’s disappearance, and that could be nothing but a new enemy. Serious enough, but it shouldn’t impact the decision to settle on Poseidon or not. Not to mention that…”

He let his words trail of. Glanced up to see Gar’Tokk watching him expectantly.

“It could be me,” Apollo admitted at last. “It may be that I simply don’t want it to work. That’s terrible, I know. Selfish and cruel, to deny to the people who look to me for leadership the happiness they’ve always sought, merely because it doesn’t mesh with my own vision, my own quest. I don’t know if that’s really what’s going on, but I can’t discount the possibility. And it frightens me to consider it.”

Gar’Tokk’s eyes narrowed, but he said nothing.

Apollo sighed and stood, walked past his Noman bodyguard and started down from the celestial chamber. Gar’Tokk followed in silence, and soon they were hurrying toward the ascensior, where the ambassadorial contingent that was preparing to depart for Poseidon would be waiting for them. They stepped into the ascensior together, and it began to move down into the bowels of the battlestar. When it came to rest on the level of the launch and landing bays, Gar’Tokk turned to look at Apollo.

“Trust your instincts, Apollo,” Gar’Tokk growled. “You are not the kind of man who would betray his people’s trust for selfish ends. If you fear something, it is only logical that there is something to fear. I will be vigilant, and watch for anything strange.”

Apollo turned to stare, awed by the Noman’s faith in him and by the new bond that had been forged by those words. He was about to respond when the ascensior doors slid open.

“Well, Commander, how kind of you to grace us with your presence,” Cain said sarcastically.

“Yes,” Apollo replied, his features grave. “I only wish Sheba were here with us.”

Cain’s smile disappeared. “The Lords smile on us, Apollo,” he said. “I have faith that my daughter will return.”

Apollo walked past Cain, acknowledging the ambassadorial staff with a nod. He was surprised to see Cassiopeia there, but said nothing.

“Faith, President Cain?” he asked. “I’m afraid it may take a little more than that. Starbuck plays a lot of pyramid at the chanceries on the *Rising Star*. He always has faith that he’ll win. Sometimes he does, out most of the time, faith doesn’t count for much. I stake my bets on action, not chance.”

Cain stepped onto the shuttle behind him. “Are you suggesting that Starbuck cheat?” the old man asked.

“Not at all,” Apollo replied. “That would be dishonest. I’m merely saying that he shouldn’t play if he isn’t prepared to lose.” As the shuttle’s engines propelled it through the launch aperture and out into space, Apollo glanced over at Gar’Tokk. It was hard to tell with the Nomen, but he could have sworn his bodyguard was smiling.

Chapter Six

THE COGITATOR CALLED LUCIFER MOVED ALONG THE WIDE

CORRIDOR in near darkness. Inside the transparent dome that comprised the top half of Lucifer’s skull, electrical charges sparked constantly, flashing off the corridor walls in a kaleidoscope of shadows and light. He seemed to glide as he walked, his long cloak hiding the motion of his legs in ghostly fashion. Lucifer was alone in the corridor. Centurions were not permitted in this sector of the base star unless they had been specifically summoned by the Imperious Leader himself. There were also two other cogitators on board, and they were likewise restricted in their movements.

Not so for Lucifer. Only he was allowed freedom of movement aboard the Imperious Leader’s base star.

What he wanted to know was *why*. It bothered him greatly that he not waste them.

Perhaps that was it—Lucifer’s knowledge of and experience with the humans. But he was uncertain. He knew, also, that Baltar still lived and might even now be cooperating with the humans. Perhaps it was for Lucifer’s knowledge of Baltar that the Imperious Leader kept him close at hand, though they certainly did not expect to encounter Baltar on this mission…

Unless the Imperious Leader knew something that Lucifer did not know.

In the darkened corridor, Lucifer paused. The sparks jumping across his glass-encased brain brightened a moment, and then subsided again. Of course, the Imperious Leader knew something—a great many things, in fact—that Lucifer did not know. He was the Imperious Leader, after all. He would have to.

The thought disturbed Lucifer, and wounded his ego. But it also intrigued him. Since his birth, and his rise to the rank of cogitator, Lucifer

had gained power by observation; by the possession of information, by identifying vital questions, and finding the answers.

It was time to find answers to the questions that now plagued him. He reached the end of the corridor, and huge doors slid open to reveal an even darker chamber within. Small fires burned in braziers in the corners of the room. At its center was a tall platform, nine steps above the floor. And atop the platform, the High Seat of the Imperious Leader. At the moment, the Seat was turned away from the chamber door. But as Lucifer entered, it began slowly to rotate toward him. Lucifer narrowed his eyes, peered through the darkness seeking out the features of the Imperious Leader. But all he could see were the twin embers of the Leader's eyes burning through the gloom.

"Lucifer. What news?" the Leader's ponderous voice inquired.

"Reports from the advance scouts seem quite positive, Imperious Leader," Lucifer replied. "Construction of the outpost proceeds apace. In other quadrants, resistance from the races we have encountered is all but eliminated. The Cylon Empire continues to grow under your guidance." The red eyes burned brightly a moment, and Lucifer thought the Leader might reply to his pandering, but he did not.

"Of the humans' fleet, there is yet no word," Lucifer said. "But our scouts will certainly find them. Eventually, there will be nowhere in the galaxy they can run from you, master."

Still, the Imperious Leader did not reply.

Against his better judgment, Lucifer asked, "Master?"

"I know exactly where the fleet is, Lucifer," the Imperious Leader said. Lucifer froze. Sparks jumped across his brain dome. He stared at his master.

"Leave me now. If you have a report from the new outpost, bring it to me. Otherwise, I desire privacy," the Imperious Leader ordered.

"By your command," Lucifer replied, and bowed.

He retreated without rising, backing toward and then through the door. When it had closed in front of him, he turned and retreated down the dimly lit corridor, more curious than ever. One way or another, Lucifer was determined to find the answers to the questions that plagued him. Sheba lay on cold stone. Her cheek was torn and crusted with dried and frozen blood. She had burns across much of her body, and where her uniform was torn and ragged, frost had formed on her flesh. Several ribs had been broken, she believed.

She barely had the presence of mind to even consider her injuries. The cold sapped her will and her mind, ate away at her tenacious hold degn life. She could barely move, but somehow, she wasn't cold enough simply to die. Somehow, her flesh was not frozen solid, nor had it begun to turn blue.

It might, she realized after a particularly grueling moment of consideration, have something to do with the long tube that snaked from a gash in her abdomen into a crevice in the ice wall of the cave. If it was a cave. She did not know for certain because she could not move…not more than to see the huge patch of red ice on the ground beside her. A slick, frozen surface made by a frighteningly large amount of what used to be her blood.

A tear slipped from Sheba's right eye, and froze almost instantly, blocking the duct. Once again, she tried to move. This time, she felt as though she might succeed, but an agonizing spike of pain shot through her gut and up her spine to her brain. Sheba began to hyperventilate. Then she stopped breathing.

It was as though someone had simply shut down her lungs with the flip of a switch. She could no longer inhale. Could no longer recall how such a complicated procedure was accomplished.

Then she was free. Breathing again, the air like shards of jagged ice dragging down her throat and through her lungs.

Her relief lasted only a moment. A sound off to her left drew her attention, but after the pain she had just experienced, she did not dare move again. Even to attempt to see what had caused that sound was unthinkable. Instead, she lay very still and hoped that whatever it was would go away.

But it did not go away.

She prayed to the Lords of Kobol, and to God himself. She prayed to her ancestors to help her devise a way to escape the frozen chamber of torture she had been placed in. Or left in. Somehow simply being left here, with no purpose, was worse than being a captive.

She prayed that Apollo would find her, though it always rankled Sheba to have to rely on anyone for assistance—even the man with whom she planned to take the Seal.

Sheba, daughter of Cain, prayed for her deliverance.

Cold talons wrapped around her left forearm, and Sheba managed to twitch in surprise and terror. She couldn't open her mouth to ask who it was, or even to scream. Her breath came faster, the icy air constricting her

lungs. The talons stroked the flesh of her arm and somehow the arm began to grow colder, then numb.

Now there was the oddest sensation of something tugging on the arm, her shoulder and neck muscles recognizing some kind of disturbance there. Sheba didn't want to know what it was. She didn't want to turn, to feel that pain again. But if her arm was numb, maybe the pain would be lessened. Maybe she was cold enough now to die…as she'd hoped she would every time she awoke in a haze of pain and muddled memory. Tugging again.

Sheba forced her head to turn, just slightly.

She saw it then, the source of that awful sensation. The long, leathery snout. The flashing needle teeth. The crimson of blood and the white of bone.

Sheba opened her mouth to scream, but even that was denied her. Baltar did not consider himself a free man. How could he, walking around with a bomb inside him? And yet, what freedom he did have was delicious indeed. Even when he had commanded a Cylon base star, with legions of Centurions at his beck and call, he had not felt completely free. The threat of execution should he fail had been omnipresent, the weight of the Imperious Leader's scrutiny maddeningly bearing down on him. Freedom was nothing more than a subjective concept created to give the bovine masses a sense of complacency. If one did not feel captive of one's goals, one was a futureless fool. That was one of the central tenets of Baltar's philosophy.

Thus, as he sat in the small chamber that had been grudgingly given over as his quarters aboard the *Galactica*—a chamber that was now brightly lit and tastefully decorated—he did not worry overmuch at his present position. Nor about the explosive device linked to his central nervous system.

For Baltar was trapped by his ambition far more completely than he would ever be imprisoned by the fools on the Quorum.

Like nearly everyone aboard the Colonial fleet, Baltar sat and stared in rapt attention at the holographic image being projected from the unicomm. As he watched, the diplomatic shuttle carrying Apollo and Cain, as well as the entire ambassadorial contingent that the Quorum had chosen, descended toward the surface of the planet Poseidon. The suspense was ridiculous, especially when it was such a simple image that had so many enthralled. It was as though time had turned back to earlier days of space travel, when

such a sight would have been a spectacle. *Ridiculous, indeed,* Baltar thought. And yet, here he was, watching intently as circumstances once again conspired to push him further away from the goal he had held close to his heart for decades—the purpose that he had known was his and his alone.

"Buffoons," he whispered, staring at the holo-image of the shuttle, blue-white tylium flame flickering at its aft.

They had always been buffoons, and it made Baltar's heart ache. Just as it ached each time he heard his name snarled with disgust by the average citizen…and every time he was called a traitor. For in his heart, in his soul, Baltar knew that it was they who were the traitors. All he had ever wanted was the best for the human race.

And, after all, what could be better for humanity that his own leadership? That had been the start of it all. Passed over time and again for the Presidency of the Quorum, he had finally realized that he would never attain that post. And even if he had, he would have had to contend with the eleven other councilors. No, he needed to rule. The war with the Cylons had gone on far too long.

Baltar had devised a way to end the war and to put himself in power simultaneously. Even now, two decades later, he remembered clearly the moment of his decision, and his certainty, then, that he would soon achieve his goal. He aided the Cylons in deceiving the Quorum so that the Colonies would be dealt a sound defeat. The Cylons would conquer the human race easily, and Baltar would rule them as regent, so long as he did not defy the Imperious Leader.

That had been the arrangement. All that he had done, he had done for the best. What were a few million lives, after all, when measured against the future well being and long-term survival of the human race? But the Cylons had betrayed *h* im! The Imperious Leader wanted nothing less than the eradication of humanity from the galaxy. Baltar had done whatever it took to stay alive, of course. He had continued to obey the Imperious Leader, trying to consolidate some power among the Cylons…only to be betrayed once more by the Imperious Leader. As he watched the shuttle continued on its way to Poseidon, a small beep told him he had a visitor.

Baltar rose and stepped to the door of his quarters, peered through the small, one-way viewport, and saw precisely who he had expected to see. He laid his palm over the door's control panel, and it slid open.

"Hello, Baltar," said the woman in the lavender gown.

“Siress Kiera,” he greeted her. “Enter and be welcome in my humble quarters. You look absolutely radiant.”

The woman beamed and swept past Baltar into his quarters. He did not fail to notice that she glanced about first to see if anyone was watching them. Baltar frowned. He wanted her feeling self-righteous, not embarrassed about spending time with him.

“Is something wrong, Kiera?” Baltar asked gently. “Was someone following you?”

“No,” she said, too quickly. “I just…no.”

“You need not be ashamed of our friendship, Siress,” Baltar said. “But you also do not need to prove that friendship to me by lying about your discomfort. I would be concerned if you weren’t uncomfortable, at least a little. But that won’t last forever. One day, I will be free again.” He paused, looked down and blinked, as if he were growing distraught.

“One day,” he continued, “they will realize that I did nothing but try to bring a swift conclusion to a war that had plagued humanity for millennia. I have told them everything they wanted to know, and a great deal that they would never even have thought of asking. At some point, they’re going to have to see that…”

He allowed his words to trail off. After a moment, he looked up to meet Kiera’s eyes and saw the pain and sympathy there. He smiled warmly at her.

“No. No, my dear, no sadness this day.” Baltar reached for her hand, and she allowed him to take it. He led Siress Kiera to a table where he had set out a small, warm supper appropriate for the end of second cycle, along with a cold bottle of ogliv wine.

“It looks wonderful,” Siress Kiera said softly, and did not try to withdraw her hand.

“I’ve also managed to get my hands on some kirasolis candy,” he said. “I seem to recall your saying you had a fondness for it.”

“You spoil me,” she said.

“It’s the least I can do to thank the one person who has believed in me from the beginning,” he told her earnestly.

She flushed a bit, and turned away a moment. That alone confirmed what Baltar already knew. Kiera had not always believed in him. Yet she had enough faith in him now that her lack of it early on gave her a bit of guilt.

He could use guilt.

Together, they looked at the holo of the shuttle for a long moment. Another setback, Baltar reminded himself. But he had suffered worse. Somehow, some way, he would reach the goal he had been striving for all these years. He would fulfill his purpose.

Not now. Not even soon. His initial gambit had taken nearly twenty yahren to prove a failure. It might take twenty more to put his second effort into play. But Baltar had always been a patient man. One day, he would force humanity to recognize how badly it needed his guidance.

“Baltar?”

He shut off the unicomm and turned to Siress Kiera, shrugging apologetically.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s very moving, don’t you think? We’ve come to a major crossroads in the history of the human race.”

“It is thrilling,” she agreed, as she allowed him to lead her to her seat. She sat in front of the table, not even glancing at the supper he had prepared. He still held her hand, and she had yet to protest.

“It’s a new beginning,” Siress Kiera said.

“A new beginning,” Baltar echoed, gazing into her eyes and kissing her gently on the hand.

“Indeed.”

Valor had lost his way.

It only lasted for a handful of centari, when his exhaustion had left him nearly unconscious. But in that short time that he lost track of his position and the stars became unfamiliar and alien to him, Valor had known a frenzy of fear, dappled with despair.

Then, slowly, the disorientation had passed. Valor reached out and began to reconnect, to weave once more the delicate telepathic web that gave him a sense of his place in the galactic quadrant Then the tendrils of his far-flung consciousness found and focused on the still resounding death echo of the Sky warriors who had been slaughtered by the Chitain. Once he had touched upon the psychic remnant of that horrific episode, Valor knew precisely where his point of departure had been. Comfortable once more with his location, he determined to rest so that he would not lose his way again. And then, he simply stopped. Stopped moving. In many ways, stopped thinking. No more forward propulsion. Momentum carried Valor forward, just slightly off course, but he had left very little of his

consciousness operational. Just enough to know where he was; a tiny awareness as the rest of his mind rejuvenated itself.

Eventually, Valor realized that he felt cold—truly understood cold for the first time. While the bodies of the Sky were not subject to damage by changes in temperature, Valor had never spent this prolonged a period of time unprotected in deep space. To his knowledge, no Sky had ever done so. It was new territory.

So, yes: cold. Or perhaps merely a disturbing numbness that had accompanied his exhaustion. In the tiny bit of awareness he had allowed himself, Valor felt an unfamiliar emotion beginning to formulate. He felt… apathy. A part of him truly did not care if he lived or died. Did not care if the Chitain ever were made to pay for their heinous crimes. But Valor knew that was merely the cold. The exhaustion. The maddening emptiness of space. Even in that half-aware state of being, he pushed such thoughts away violently.

When he became fully aware once more, as well rested as he imagined he would ever be again, and yet still exhausted, Valor did not know how long he'd drifted on the astral winds. He reached out his senses across the cosmos, hoping to touch the mind of another Sky warrior. Still, he found nothing. He was not yet close enough to the planet of his birth to reach the minds of any Sky there.

But it did not matter. In time, he would reach the planet of the Sky. In time, Valor knew he would feel the caress of the minds of his people once more. It did not matter how long it took.

The Chitain would still be there.

And when the Sky fell in hordes from the heavens, vengeance on the wing, the Chitain would know the full extent of the error they had made. Troy didn't have another recon patrol until first cycle in the morning, which was good. He'd been up almost all the way through light cycle the night before, and he badly needed rest.

His mind was on Sheba, of course. But he had to admit what the others had already begun to say out loud. She might very well be dead. Whatever was out there, prowling the stars, it had killed two talented young Viper pilots. Sheba was one of the best, but she was only human, after all. Still, something told Troy that she yet lived. Maybe she had been hit, her Viper crippled. She might even be drifting out there in space, praying for a rescue…or…

They might have already left her behind.

Recon patrols had been doubled up now, two pairs at a time—no Warrior flew alone. In this way, they had begun to retrace the fleet's path, spreading out from the sides of its wake in pursuit of some sign of Sheba. But their search was almost over. After tonight, it would be in the hands of God and the Lords of Kobol to deliver her safely back to the battlestar. Troy shivered. He couldn't imagine how his father was dealing with it. Probably wasn't dealing with it at all, he thought. Not outwardly. But it had to be gnawing at him, battering at his thoughts at every waking moment. Just as they had been about to take the Seal, for something so tragic to…

No. He pushed the thoughts away. He wasn't going to give up, not yet. There was still a chance, and as long as that chance existed, Troy wasn't going to give Sheba up for dead.

With his crimson flight jacket over his shoulder, Troy walked swiftly down the corridor that led to the pilots' quarters. His boots tromped noisily, echoing down the hall. When the door to the pilots' quarters slid open, he was startled to find so many Warriors gathered in one place. In silence, they watched a large flatscreen upon which the unicomm signal was received. At first, Troy could not see what was on the screen through the forest of heads that blocked his way. But then, someone near the front of the room moved, and he saw the shuttle carrying his father and the others to Poseidon.

"Frack," he said grimly. "You all had me nervous, there. I thought my father was making another speech."

Only Jolly, who was nearest to Troy, turned to smile at the joke. But Lieutenant Niccolo, who had been a yahren ahead of Troy at Academy, glanced quickly at him.

"No speeches needed anymore, Troy," Niccolo said. "This is it. This is everything we've been fighting for all this time. We're home."

"Maybe you're home, Lieutenant," Captain Hecate said loudly. "Me, I'll wait and see what Commander Apollo says before I decide where to land my Viper."

"You mean if Apollo wants to go on, you'll stay with the fleet?" someone asked.

"Won't be much of a fleet, I don't think," another voice—Troy thought it might belong to Ensign Yanna—said loudly.

"All I know is, I don't want to keep venting my life out into space," Niccolo replied, with a curt glance at Captain Hecate. "If Poseidon has

room for us, and Cain will have us, I'm for staying."

"What about Earth?" Troy asked, more confused than angry. "Doesn't finding it mean anything to you? What about the Thirteenth Tribe?"

"Myths and legends, Troy," Niccolo replied, causing a collective intake of breath from the others gathered there among the pilots' berths.

"Poseidon is real. We're here. We know it can sustain life because there's already a human colony down there. A colony that might include people we thought we'd left behind when most of us were still children."

"What about the Cylons?" Hecate asked. "They're still out here, you know. No, I'm with Apollo. He's gotten us this far. He and his father before him."

The argument continued, but Troy couldn't be a part of it anymore. He realized rather quickly that if he wanted rest, he wasn't going to get it in the pilots' quarters. He leaned against the wall in the corridor, trying to determine his next step. He could, he supposed, use his father's quarters to rest in. But that would seem a bit haughty if any of the others found out. He would be teased mercilessly—which he could handle. It was the truth that might lie behind that teasing that he wanted to avoid. The door slid open again, and Jolly came out. The heavyset Lieutenant's eyes widened with pleasure as he saw Troy.

"Ah, I'm glad you haven't gone," Jolly said. "Boomer wanted me to tell you…"

"What about you, Jolly?" Troy asked suddenly.

"Hmm?" Jolly asked, eyes narrowed with his lack of understanding.

"If Cain opens Poseidon up to the fleet, and my father wants to go on, what will you do?" Troy asked him, watching the other man's eyes. They didn't waver.

"Let me tell you something, *Boxey"* Jolly said, and Troy bristled at the older man's use of his childhood nickname. "I've known your father since Academy. I've known you since you were six yahren old. Maybe I'm not the best pilot in the fleet. Maybe I'm not the best Warrior. Maybe I don't have Starbuck's charm or Apollo's charisma or Sheba's skill or Boomer's confidence.

"I've always been the quiet one. The one who takes the flank, who covers the daredevils, who holds the fort. I've been content with that my whole life, and it's been a good life. You've known me all this time. I watched you grow up. We've flown in the same squadron for nearly seven

yahren.” Jolly stopped speaking then, and glanced down at the floor of the corridor.

“But you don’t know me very well at all, do you?”

“Jolly, I’m sorry,” Troy said, regretting his words deeply. “I didn’t mean to question your loyalty. It’s just such a confusing time, and I…well, I’d hoped that’s what you’d say, but the lure of a colony is quite tempting. And you have a family, after all. Wouldn’t Guinn like a home and hearth?” Now it was Jolly’s turn to look apologetic. “You’re right, Troy. Guinn would love to settle. But she also knows what the fleet means to me. I believe in Adama’s dream, kid. Always have. I’m not going to stop searching for it until Apollo does.”

He held out a hand to shake, and Troy took it firmly. Then he touched his forehead in the traditional pilot’s salute and Jolly returned the gesture.

“So what did Boomer want?” Troy asked.

“Boomer?” Jolly said, having obviously forgotten the reason he’d come out after Troy to begin with. “Oh, right. He wanted you to come to his and Phaedra’s quarters as soon as you got back from recon. Didn’t say why.” Troy shrugged, nodded, and spun on his heel. As he walked away, he felt good. The scene in the pilots’ quarters had disturbed him, no denying that. But his talk with Jolly had rejuvenated him in a way. The many non-military citizens of the fleet had long been its greatest weakness. Trying to defend those vessels left the fleet exposed and vulnerable. For the first time, Troy wondered if colonizing Poseidon might not be the best thing possible. It might even make the fulfillment of Apollo’s vision that much easier. They could always come back to Poseidon after they had found Earth. Or send word.

Troy’s mind spun with these things as he made his way over to the quarters Boomer shared with his wife, Phaedra. He had no idea what the Major might want, but the message that Jolly passed on hadn’t left much room for argument. Troy only hoped that it was a social occasion and not something political. As far as he could see, it had to be one or the other. Ever since Count Iblis had undermined the fleet’s entire political system, and made fools of just about everyone, people had been very diplomatic with one another. Or at least relatively so. Certainly, there were still a vast number of conflicting groups and hot-button issues, but the usual intrigue had lessened considerably. Troy hoped it stayed that way.

Dalton was always spoiling for a fight, just waiting for someone to step out of line. Troy was different. He was a Warrior first, and everything else second. Politics, whether fleet-wide or individual, tended to distract from the more important issues at hand, like survival.

He reached the door to the newlyweds' quarters, and rapped lightly on its smooth surface. After several microns went by without any answer, he rapped again. This time, the door slid aside instantly.

It was dark inside.

Immediately, klaxons began to peal in Troy's mind. He dropped his right hand to the sidearm he wore, and took two steps into the main chamber. A dim light flickered from the open door of a second, smaller chamber off to his left. It was the only illumination available, and barely allowed him to move through Boomer's chambers without stumbling over something in the dark.

Troy drew his laser pistol, held it up with both hands and squinted, trying to scan the darkness of this outer room to be certain he was indeed alone. The place did not look as though anything had been stolen, nor did there seem to have been any struggle. Still, he remained completely silent, remembering that the door had been opened from the inside. Now he stood with his back to the wall, peering around the corner into what appeared to be the couple's bed chamber. The light within flickered, and suddenly, Troy knew why.

Something was on fire!

With only half a mind on his own safety, he said a silent prayer that whatever had befallen Boomer and Phaedra, they were still alive. Then he shot across the chamber's doorway and leaned against the interior wall of the bed chamber. Weapon gripped tightly between his hands, Troy took a deep breath and then spun, setting his legs wide apart as he swung his weapon in an arc trying to cover the enter bed chamber.

No Boomer. No Phaedra. In fact, the room was completely empty. Nobody home at all. And yet, there had to be someone. Two old-fashioned candles burned on an ornate antique Tauran table in one corner. Next to the candles was a bottle of ambrosa and two long fluted glasses. Troy grinned, and silently blamed Boomer. Obviously, the Major had horrible timing. Phaedra had planned some kind of special celebration for herself and her husband. Troy didn't know where they were, and realized he had best make a hasty retreat.

There was a tiny click in the other room, and the musiclink came on in the middle of a Sagitarrian symphony that reminded Troy of his mother. The music was beautiful, but in that moment of dawning horror, Troy had a truly disturbing vision of the next few microns. Phaedra had planned a lovely welcome for her husband when he returned to their quarters this night. She had been in another chamber when Troy had entered, and now she was out there, and she thought that *he* was Boomer. Troy felt the warmth in his cheeks, and he was already quite flushed when he turned toward the outer chamber, trying to come up with some kind of excuse that would alleviate his embarrassment as he saw the vesper-sheathed woman who stood framed in the doorway, face half shadowed in the candlelight.

It wasn't Phaedra.

"Hello, Troy. I'm happy you got my message."

He stared at her.

"Dalton?" Troy blinked. "You look beautiful." She smiled, then, with a secret kind of knowledge that no girl of eighteen yahren should ever be allowed, and which Troy had come to suspect they all possessed. Only, Dalton was more confident of it than others.

Much more.

"Do you think so?" she asked, shifting her weight from one leg to the other, making the vesper, a sheer Gemon fabric, glide across her body with the tiniest rasp.

Troy had never heard a sound more startling. He looked at her a moment, and couldn't breathe. And she did indeed look beautiful. Petite and feminine in a way that she so often tried to hide, her honey-gold hair cascading over one shoulder, pulled back on the other side. And that sheath, so sheer that it was almost indecent.

"We have Phaedra to thank for the candles," Dalton said, filling the space of his hesitation. "And for the surprise, of course."

"It is…it is quite a surprise," Troy said, suddenly able to breathe again. He tore his eyes from her face…from her body.

Dalton wasn't having it. She walked the few steps across the bed chamber, the vesper whispering its maddening secrets. She reached up and turned his face toward hers, so that she could see his eyes. Those eyes. They searched his, their invitation implicit.

"You're seven yahren older than I am," Dalton said bluntly. "When I was fourteen, you were twenty-one. But I'm eighteen now, Troy. You're

twenty-five. In five more yahren, I'll be twenty-three. Do you understand where I'm going with this?"

He could only look at her and nod.

Dalton pushed him back toward the bed until the backs of his legs bumped against it and he sat down on the soft berth. Now Dalton was looking down at him, and Troy had the feeling that she preferred it that way. Perhaps she thought it would give her all of his attention, but she'd had his full attention from the moment she stood in the doorway.

"I'm going to tell you a secret," she said softly.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," he argued.

Dalton frowned, and Troy shut his mouth quickly. He definitely did not want to make her angry, now more than ever. Troy had a feeling the ambrosa bottle on the small table in the corner might make a sufficiently solid club if Dalton chose to use it.

She moistened her lips with her tongue and Troy felt his entire body undergo a tiny convulsion. He kept his eyes on her beautiful face, difficult enough a task but better by far than looking too closely at the sheath she wore, the vesper that was so obviously *all* she wore. Dalton leaned over slightly and kissed him gently on the forehead. Her eyes grabbed his, and would not allow him to turn away, not even for a moment.

"I was fifteen," she whispered. "You were tutoring me in Evasive Maneuvers—seems like your specialty today—and we sat close in the Viper Flight Sim Unit. You turned to me and said something, something I didn't even hear then, because I'd stopped paying attention the micron you got that close to me.

"But you spoke the same instant that I drew another breath. I inhaled your words, your own breath. It was warm and sweet and slid into my body and down into my lungs, and it had a flavor that I remember even still. It was the most intimate, erotic thing that has ever happened to me.

"I have loved you since I was a little girl, Troy, just a toddler really. Idolized you as everything I wanted to be. But ever since that day, in the Flight Sim, I have been crazy *in* love with you, and just waiting for you to notice."

Dalton slid down to sit next to him on the berth and ran her fingers along the soft flesh of his throat. He reached out gently to lift her chin, and then he kissed her.

“I noticed,” Troy whispered, and kissed her again—deeply and tenderly, in the way that he had, for so long, denied even to himself that he wanted her.

“Believe me, I noticed.”

Chapter Seven

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF POSEIDON THUS FAR?” Cain asked

Apollo, smiling. The older man’s gaunt features looked surprisingly youthful now, and his penetrating gaze held an added light as obvious pride swept aside, at least for the moment, all other considerations.

“I think that you’ve accomplished much in the ten yahren you’ve been here,” Apollo said to Cain.

He was sincere in his assessment. Apollo, Cassiopeia, and Tigh had set ground at a Poseidon launch facility and been greeted by representatives of a surprisingly populous colony. Apollo thought that he had seen more new faces in the past few centons than in the preceding ten yahren. There had been a few familiar ones, too, officers and citizens he remembered from the *Galactica’s* previous encounter with the *Pegasus*—the battlestar that Cain commanded. They had taken some time for greetings and good wishes, and then Cain led the landing party to a ground car and whisked them to the Poseidon colony’s industrialized heart.

Apollo and the others listened attentively as Cain catalogued his colonists’ many achievements. They drove past foundries and factories, past smelters and warehouses and dozens of other facilities, all arrayed in a ringed configuration at the center of the settlement.

“Our equivalent to the *Hephaestus*, your fleet’s foundry ship,” Cain said. “Our own took a…a meteor strike, so we moved the heavier equipment from the *Pegasus* to the surface and used it as the basis of all this.”

Now, as they rounded the last of the already-weathered structures, the main excavation came into view. The ground car drew to a halt and the landing party climbed out. The ground car had been climate-controlled, but now, the hot, humid air of Poseidon wrapped itself around Apollo and company as Cain led them to the boundaries of the mine. In moments, all of them were bathed in sweat that glistened beneath the planet’s giant sun. Poseidon was a humid, watery world with a near-tropical climate—a dramatic change from the controlled environments of the *Galactica’s* fleet.

“That sped along our buildup,” Cain continued. “Moving the forges planetside put the artisans closer to the resources they need. We fabricate all

but the largest components here, and then lift them into orbit for final assembly. The shipwrights take over from there."

The resources he referred to were the saligium ore beds that lay exposed before them. The saligium mine was a yawning, open pit, the product of a quick and brutal mineral extraction technique rarely used on more heavily settled worlds. It was also large, covering nearly as much territory as the rest of the main settlement combined. Large—and growing larger, both in depth and in breadth. The muggy air was filled with the throbbing roar of the powerful mining equipment that clawed and dug at the pit's walls. They tore free huge slabs of ore, crushed them into rubble, and then dumped the debris into other specialized vehicles for transport to the refining smelters. From those furnaces, towering chimneys vented black smoke into the cloud-dappled sky, where it dispersed but, Apollo knew, did not disappear.

Apollo held back a sigh. He understood the need for what Cain had done to this world, but he was not blind to its cost.

From the *Galactica's* bridge, Poseidon had appeared pristine and untouched: a glistening gem that hung in orbit around its sun. Algae-rich oceans covered nearly nine-tenths of the planet's surface, as verdant as the tangled vegetation that cloaked its single continent. Cain's settlement had tamed some of that tropical growth, beaten it back far enough to establish a settlement in the heart of that single landmass.

Gar'Tokk grunted softly. Apollo wondered what thoughts went through the Noman's mind now, but, even without probing, he suspected that Gar'Tokk felt much as he did about the mine. The Borellian Nomen, though born of human stock, had evolved to meet the challenges posed by ancient Caprica. Their ancestral leader, Borellus, had led his people down an evolutionary path that took them away from technology, so that their bodies had changed, rather than their world. To a follower of Borellus, what Cain's settlement was doing to Poseidon could hardly be a pretty sight.

"We could have done more in that time, on a better planet," Cain said in a gruff tone that didn't quite match the enigmatic expression on his face.

Cain was hiding something, Apollo suddenly realized. But what? And why?

"But this one has sufficed," Cain continued. "Relatively low in heavy minerals, so that gravity's a bit low, too, but there's enough saligium present in the crust to keep our new planet-based forge busy. Enough hydrocarbons available to provide energy that's cheap, if not clean. We found tylium in

one of the outer moons, too, so there's no shortage of fuel for the new ships. No natives now to contend with us for the resources. As for the rest of it—the place is close enough to its sun to keep it perpetually hot—too hot."

"Why make it your home, then?" Cassiopeia said, asking the question that was on Apollo's lips. "You're not a man who's happy not getting what he wants," she continued. Her words seemed to hold a hidden meaning, a veiled reference to their past entanglements.

Or future entanglements? Apollo wondered.

But Cain seemed to take no notice of her implication. Instead, he paused in mid-stride and made an all-encompassing gesture, a sweeping movement of one strong arm that indicated his entire surroundings.

"Poseidon has what I needed," he said. "Saligium for ship construction, and native flora and fauna that can feed my people."

"A surprisingly large number of people," Tigh noted. "And you mentioned a foundry ship before. Your lot has changed in the twenty yahren since the siege at Gamoray, when we saw you last." Cain nodded. He looked directly at Apollo and said something surprising. "Your father was a great man," he commented. "We did not always agree, but I had nothing but respect for him. I hope you know that."

"And he had great respect for you, Commander," Apollo responded, touched by the evident sincerity in the older man's tones. "But…" Cain gestured again, this time for silence. "Never was that respect greater," he continued, "than when fate cast me in his role. That cycle came round some nineteen yahren ago, soon after the *Pegasus* parted ways with your fleet."

"The siege at Gamoray." Tigh remembered the hard-fought battle waged by the *Galactica* and the *Pegasus* against Cylon base stars. Cain's tactical genius had led to the destruction of two base stars, even if a third, bearing Baltar, had escaped. "We had thought the *Pegasus* destroyed, then," Tigh continued. "But no one was certain." Cain shook his head in Tigh's direction. "Not destroyed, but damaged. The *Pegasus* still bears the scars of that campaign, both from direct hits and from associated debris," he said. "You and Apollo are both seasoned Warriors; you know how much wreckage and rubble a base star makes when it explodes. Two of them, in fast succession…"

"They made a sea of shrapnel, most of it precisely the same metals that our ship sensors are designed to detect," Apollo said, thinking back to the

grim system status reports he had heard following the siege. “The *Galactica’s* monitoring systems were effectively blinded for many centons.”

“The *Pegasus* as well,” Cain confirmed. “Until we met again, I had thought your entire fleet destroyed.

“One yahren after Gamoray, the *Pegasus* was still within the Cylon perimeter,” Cain continued. “We were fighting our own war, but with only one battlestar, my options were limited. Strike and run, harry the enemy, then flee to fight again—not the kind of war I like to wage, but the only one that was available to me.”

Apollo suddenly wondered how could ever have thought Cain anything like Adama. Cain’s words were not ones that Adama could ever have spoken, no matter what the circumstance. There was no kind of war that Adama had *liked* waging. Instead, Apollo’s father had seen armed conflict only as a final, desperate option—one that a people should prepare for, one that they could take when necessary, but never embrace.

“We had destroyed a Cylon supply base and were evading reprisal when we received the first distress signals,” Cain continued. “At first, I was reluctant to credit them, but then another joined the call, and then a third and a fourth. A battlestar’s engines have a readily distinguishable energy signature, at least when it is not occluded by space shrapnel, and that signature has a very specific meaning to refugees from the original Twelve Colonies. They had screened us, knew we were within range.”

“So that’s how you discovered that others survived the destruction,” Tigh said, looking at Cain. “But I don’t understand. The *Galactica*…”

“The *Galactica* was too late,” Cain said simply. “Too late to stand against the Cylons, too late to save all the refugees. After the Cylon attack, she returned to Colonial space too late to do more than gather up whatever luckless craft and citizens remained. But you arrived even as that first wave of evacuee vessels had already begun to disperse.” Apollo thought about that, thought about the desperate centons following the Cylon Alliance’s brutal destruction of the Twelve Colonies. He had worked with Adama and all the rest to gather together as many survivors and functioning spacecraft as possible, to join the *Galactica* in a mass exodus from Colonial space.

From what Cain was saying, they had missed a few.

“I found thirty-two craft, all told,” Cain said. “Barges, agro-ships, merchants, a few warships, all crammed to overflowing with men and

women from all of the Twelve Colonies." He paused for a moment, his air of self-satisfaction falling away as a look of genuine sorrow took its place.

"Only the Lords know how many others we both missed, and how many were found by the Cylons instead of by us. These particular vessels had scraped by for a yahren or so, avoiding the Cylons as best they could, but they needed guidance and protection. They needed me, and they needed the *Pegasus*. Chance and fate had given me my own rag-tag fleet, and my own people. Those are the folk who populate this world now." Apollo considered the irony of that comment, and was certain that Tigh and Cassiopeia were doing the same. Cain was a man whose views regarding war were quite clear, voiced many times to anyone who would listen. To Cain, a Warrior's primary duties lay in fighting the enemy, not in guarding the civilian populace.

Yet, Cain was not a man that Apollo could consider evil. Shortsighted, combative, bellicose, yes, Cain could be all of these things and worse, but he was not evil. By his own code, he was an ethical man who faced his responsibilities. To find him here, now, responsible for leading and guiding an entire society, and not merely a craft or fleet…

"It must have been quite an adjustment," Apollo said. Cain nodded in acknowledgement and resignation. "A man does what he must," he said. "Shortly thereafter, we found this world, remote enough from the last Cylon sighting, yet habitable and with the resources we need."

"You've accomplished a great deal in the ten yahren you've been here," Apollo said, for the second time.

But Cain's words troubled him. Everything that they had seen or heard of so far was devoted, directly or indirectly, to the business of war. The living quarters looked more like barracks than residences. Even the local populace had a regimented air about them.

"We've accomplished more than you realize, I think. We've made some advances in Viper armament and weaponry, as well as some other things that I will show you later," Cain continued. "You and I have found one another again at a singularly auspicious moment, Apollo. Two nearly completed battlestars, the *Daedelus* and the *New Bellephon*, wait in orbit even now, in the final stages of outfitting, along with a dozen lesser warships. I had intended to complete a third battlestar before launching the next campaign, but your presence may change things a bit. In case I didn't

make it clear to you before, we're not just building a home here, we're building a fleet. There's a place in it for the *Galactica*."

"And her people?" Cassiopeia asked.

"All but one of them," Cain responded. "All but Baltar. He'll find no welcome in any alliance between our folk."

"Those are matters for the Quorum to decide," Apollo said, privately stunned by the calm assurance of Cain's pronouncement. He had expected an offer of refuge or asylum or alliance for the members of the fleet, but Cain evidently wanted the *Galactica* itself, as well. "I doubt they will be eager to embrace your offer, however," he continued. "We have our own goals, and we're tired of war."

"All the more reason to end it, then," Cain said through tightly pursed lips. "End it by winning it. End it by crushing the Cylons forever."

"You'll need more than four battlestars to do that, no matter how heavily armed," Apollo said doggedly. "Six weren't enough to stand against the Cylons, when they destroyed the Twelve Colonies."

"Six battlestars, caught unprepared and unwary, betrayed by one of our own," Cain snapped, and then repeated the words. " *By one of our own*. That won't happen this time, I trust. We have less patience with traitors here, and fewer assets to coddle them with."

"The Cylons have made advances, too," Apollo said, ignoring the barbed reference to Baltar's current status, which did not please him entirely, either. "What do you know of current Cylon status? When was the last time you saw indications of Cylon activity?"

Cain scowled. "Six yahren. A Viper patrol encountered an isolated scout at our perimeter and managed to destroy it. There's been no sign of them since," he said. "They don't appear to be active in this sector, and we've been too busy to go looking for them."

"That's not typical Cylon behavior," Tigh said. "Scouts don't stray far from their base stars, and they report back with monotonous regularity. I would have expected reprisals."

"I felt the same, but they never came," Cain said, and smiled crookedly.

"It may have been an outrider, or a rogue," Apollo said slowly. "But there's another possibility—that they're preparing to infiltrate this sector and the unit you encountered was a survey scout. If so, they'll be back, sooner or later."

“The possibility placed considerable urgency upon our research and development efforts. An occasional threat does wonders for morale,” Cain said. “We’re ready for them now.”

“How can you say that?” Apollo asked, blinking in shock and disbelief at the other man’s words. “Your ‘advances’ haven’t been combat tested!

Your fighters haven’t seen action in six yahren or more, and you have no idea of the Cylons’ current tech and combat status. You haven’t seen the things we have!”

“I don’t need your assessment of my military capability, or of the enemy’s capabilities,” Cain said coldly.

“You most certainly do,” Apollo said, trying hard to hide at least some of the fury that rushed through him, but no longer concerned with whether or not Cain’s people witnessed this argument. “We’re the ones that the war found once more, while you were building your little empire here! It’s been a long time since you faced Cylon fire, Cain, and things have changed. Why, Baltar’s testimony alone…”

Cain interrupted him, his cold voice suddenly even colder. “I place no credence in the witness of traitors,” he hissed. “You’ll have to do better than that, Apollo, before I’ll change my plans.”

“President Cain! Commander Apollo! Please!” Cassie said. “We’re allies, not adversaries. There’s no need for conflict here.”

A long, tense moment passed, as Cain and Apollo gazed steadily at one another. Then the tension seemed to flow from Cain’s body, and his lips curved in a wry grin.

“There’s all the need in the cosmos for conflict, Cassie, but not amongst ourselves,” he said, and gestured toward the waiting ground car. “We can talk of those matters later. Come now. It’s nearly meal time. You must be famished.”

Apollo wasn’t sure that he was hungry, but he knew that he wanted to end the discussion, before tempers flared again—or at least until he and Cain could speak of such things alone. He made no protest as Cain led them all back to the cooler confines of the ground car.

The mid-day meal was simple but filling, and a welcome change from shipboard fare that had become a bit too familiar in the preceding long yahren, no matter how skilled the fleet’s chefs were. In a secluded corner of the settlement’s main mess hall, partitioned for privacy, a uniformed

attendant served them grilled meat and vegetables, and a salad made from greens that resembled beschkurd shoots.

Apollo lifted a forkful of his steak to his mouth, chewed and swallowed.

“It’s good,” he said, considering the texture and slightly exotic taste of the meat. “I don’t suppose it’s ship-bred, and I don’t think its bova. Is it something native?”

Cain nodded. “An herbivore,” he said. “They roam the local jungles. We captured some stock during our first yahren here, and started a herd. The animals adjusted well to our domestication of them. Or re-domestication, perhaps. We think that they might be descended from the animals kept by the original human population.”

“I think you’d best explain a bit more, Commander,” Apollo said, containing his excitement. *So we read the holomap correctly after all*, he thought.

“Do you have definitive proof of an indigenous populace?” Apollo continued. “We’ve all come too far and fought too hard to tantalize each other with mysteries. And, as Cassie says, we’re allies, not adversaries.”

“No mystery,” Cain responded, a dismissive tone in his voice. “I told you earlier that this world was adequate for our purposes, but not ideal. One reason that we chose to settle here, despite my reservations, was that the initial survey team found signs of a previous Population, of unknown origin but definitely true human. Whether or not they were an ancient Kobollian colony, is unknown. But that finding did make the place more attractive, at least to some of my advisors. Their closest ruins are a few hundred kilometrons to the north.”

“I would like to see them,” Apollo said.

“I don’t see how that would be profitable,” Cain said. “Your time here is limited, and there are other, more important matters to attend.”

“I can be the judge of how I spend my time,” Apollo said. “The ruins could be important.”

Cain grunted. “There’s not much to see,” he said. “Some exposed rock structures, the remains of an obelisk, badly overgrown with vines and jungle growth. Anything less durable than stone weathered away long ago. I can have someone take you to the site later, if you insist.”

“I do,” Apollo said curtly.

“Can you tell what happened to the native population?” Cassiopeia asked.

“I don’t have the faintest idea,” Cain said, irritated now. “My science officers took the presence of the ruins as proof that Poseidon could support us. This is a military outpost here, not a research project. I don’t have the manpower or the resources to waste on researching some eroded stones.”

“I would draw a different conclusion from that finding,” Apollo said.

“An extinct people isn’t very good proof of an hospitable environment.”

“Maybe they didn’t like the weather,” Tigh said.

“The indigenous population clearly didn’t have the technology to defend itself, and perhaps not the spirit, either,” Commander Cain said sharply, speaking to Apollo and pointedly ignoring Tigh. “Most of this landmass is covered with tropical jungle. We’ve beaten it back to build this colony, and we beat back the local predators, too, but it wasn’t easy. The previous human population did the same, but fared less well, apparently. They died out, a long time ago.”

“There may be more to it than that,” Apollo said edgily. “And the issue of technology—”

“They fought the world on its own terms, and the world won.” Gar’Tokk said, startling everyone. The Noman had remained nearly silent since planetfall, even declining to eat in the others’ presence. The words he spoke now were more than he had uttered since setting foot on Poseidon’s soil. “They were unworthy,” he continued.

“I’m familiar with the philosophy of Borellus, and with your people’s history,” Cain said slowly, obviously also taken aback, but also speaking carefully. The Nomen were renowned fighters, after all. “You may well be correct.”

Gar’Tokk nodded respectfully at Cain with the air of one warrior recognizing another. Again, Apollo felt surprise. It was nearly unprecedented for a Noman to demonstrate such courtesy for a “mere” human, no matter how venerated. For some reason, he found the sentiment not only surprising, but irritating. He had no doubt of Gar’Tokk’s loyalty to him, but it was unnerving for Apollo to hear his own bodyguard side with someone else.

“From a scientific perspective alone, I, for one, would like to learn more about the previous populace,” Cassiopeia said. “And what became of them.”

“Cassie is right,” Apollo said. “There could be more to this than you realize. We need to know of these people, and their fate.”

“Tomorrow, then,” Cain said, clearly annoyed at his persistent disagreement. “I’ll arrange sleeping quarters for you here.”

“We had intended to return to the *Galactica* before light cycle,” Tigh said.

“I would prefer you sleep here,” Cain said. “Allow my people the luxury of unfamiliar faces. You’re the first human visitors we’ve had here, after all, and I still have more to show you.”

“I think I’d like to stay,” Cassiopeia said. “We should be in-system for a week, at least, before the Quorum even puts the matter to the vote. It won’t make much difference if I sleep on the *Galactica* or here tonight.” Tigh said, “I’ll second that. I still want to see some of those ‘advances’

the commander says he’s made.”

Apollo saw no reason not to make it unanimous. “I’ll contact the *Galactica”* he said, “and provide Athena with an update. There are some other aspects of your settlement here that I would like to see more of, as well.”

Besides, he was more certain than ever that Cain was hiding something. Something about the way the older man spoke, the way he deftly guided the conversation to topics of his own choosing, suggested that there was more to Poseidon than Apollo or any of his fellows had seen so far. Apollo could read no real hostility in Cain’s intent, but there was certainly an element of secrecy.

For a brief moment, he considered simply taking the knowledge from the other man’s mind, but decided against it. There were ethical and moral aspects to the use of his new abilities. Were it Baltar before him now, Apollo might have felt differently, but Cain was no enemy. Apollo was beginning to weary of secrets, however.

“The man’s industriousness is incredible,” Athena said over Apollo’s commlink later, genuine awe evident in her voice and on her face. “Cain established this site only ten yahren ago, and he’s already accomplished so much…”

Apollo nodded, but didn’t say anything in response. He was in the small, sparsely furnished chamber that Cain had assigned him for his stay. He was exhausted after the rigors of the day, from trying to adjust to the oppressive heat and wet, clinging air of the new planet even as he struggled to process all the new sights and information. Apollo was still a young man and physically fit, but Poseidon’s was a demanding environment. He had to

wonder at how tirelessly Cain's people worked, despite the oppressive circumstances.

He didn't suppose they had any choice.

The preceding five centons had been very busy ones for Apollo, as he took in nearly all the sights that the new colony had to offer before making contact again with the *Galactica*. He had deliberately used conventional communications technology for that contact, rather than exercising his growing mental abilities, in part because the commlink was more suited to technical information, and in part from simple fatigue. Even with the commlink's help, however, he was tired enough to allow Athena to do most of the talking.

"Jolly took a shuttle to the orbital shipyard," Athena continued. "Tolen gave him a guided tour. Do you remember Tolen?"

Again, Apollo nodded. Tolen, lean, officious and condescending, was one of Cain's fleet officers, as he had been nearly twenty yahren ago, during the *Galactica's* last encounter with the *Pegasus*. Apollo had never liked Tolen, but he found it somewhat reassuring to learn that the man was still alive and still held a prominent role in Cain's service even after so much time had passed.

Almost everything else had changed, after all.

"They've built two battlestars from native material," Athena said. "Jolly says the construction work is up to Colonial standards; Cain must have had a full set of specifications onboard the *Pegasus*. They've also built a full complement of lesser warships and rearmored the rest for their fleet. It's hard to believe that they've done so much in so short a time without an existing industrial base."

"They had the foundation for one," Apollo said. "One of Cain's foundlings was a forge ship. He says it took a meteor strike, but they were able to salvage enough equipment to make a good start, planetside." He felt a sudden twinge of doubt as he relayed Cain's account to his sister. Something about the way that that Cain had paused while saying

"meteor strike" lingered in Apollo's memory.

"Even so, they've done an incredible job," Athena said. "I don't know how he accelerated construction so thoroughly—"

"The answer to that is simple. He did it by establishing a military government and conscripting all of its citizens," Apollo said sourly. "That, and three work shifts per cycle, sped things up nicely. They're only a few

steps up from slave labor here, Athena." He had spent much of the afternoon speaking with local citizenry and gathering information on their lives as discreetly as he could, and what he had learned had not pleased him.

Apparently, Cain's new role in life was not so very different from his old one, after all.

Now it was Athena's turn to remain silent for a moment, but an expression of something very much like shock flowed across her typically reserved features at her brother's words. Despite her family's long military tradition, she, like Apollo, saw such work as society's guardian, and not its reason for being. Finally, she said, "That will make settlement here less attractive to the fleet's citizenry, let alone to the Quorum."

"The situation shouldn't come as a surprise, to any of us," Apollo resumed. "War is all Cain knows. He's like a sheathed sword, Athena, a blade that wants to be drawn. The only reason he set to ground here, the reason he's done all that he has, is so that he can ready himself for a new campaign against the enemy. I can understand that, but I have to wonder what he'll do with his life, if— *when* the Cylon Alliance finally falls."

"How realistic are his plans?" Athena finally asked.

"I don't know," Apollo said. "I don't know much about them, and I don't know how he intends to achieve them. I suppose I could find out, but that doesn't seem right. He's not our enemy, or even an adversary. It's just that his way of thinking is so different from ours, and there's so much to think about already. The settlement, the new ships, the new weapon systems…"

"You seem irritated, Apollo .What else is going on down there?"

"There are too many puzzle pieces here that don't quite fit," Apollo said,

"and I think that Cain's holding something back." Quickly, he told her of Cain's encounter with a Cylon raider some six yahren before, and also of the human ruins that had been found on the planet.

"Humans?" Athena said eagerly. "So that confirms the data from the holomap! From which tribe?"

"I don't know. Cain didn't have much comment to make about the ruins. They may even have been wanderers from before the Twelve Colonies."

"Can't Cain provide you with any information?"

“He can’t tell me what he doesn’t know, and swords, sheathed or otherwise, don’t do much research,” Apollo said. “He’s left that for us. Cassie and I will visit the ruins tomorrow.”

“Will Cain accompany you?”

“Probably not,” Apollo said, privately pleased. The conversation earlier in the day had been tense enough that he looked forward to a respite from his host’s company.

“That might be to the good. You can confer with Cassie a bit about him. She knows him reasonably well, and might be able to offer you some insight. Did he have a reason for not being your host tomorrow, too?”

“Nothing specific,” Apollo said. “But the colony is a busy place, after all. Cain has other duties, and the ruins don’t interest him in the slightest. My impression is that he doesn’t understand why they interest us so much, either.”

“But—signs of a human populace…”

“He thinks differently than we do,” Apollo repeated. “He’s one of us, but he has his own goals and needs, and historical research isn’t among them.”

Athena nodded again. “Signal when you’re ready to come back,” she said. “I’ll have a copy of Jolly’s report waiting for you, as well as Tigh’s report to the Quorum.”

“By then, I should be ready to make one of my own,” Apollo said. He paused silently for a moment, before finally asking, “Has there been any word of Sheba?”

“No,” Athena said, speaking in a carefully neutral tone that masked her concern.

“I should be there,” Apollo said tensely.

“Why? So that you can scan the commlink frequencies, and make yourself frantic?” Athena asked. “If we hear anything, if there’s any sign, I’ll contact you immediately.”

“I know,” Apollo said. “It’s just…” His words trailed off as a wave of unaccustomed frustration and worry swept over him.

Athena responded telepathically this time. *Apollo,* she said gently with surprising skill. *Better than almost anyone, you know desperate circumstances can reverse themselves, and you also know how skilled and resourceful Sheba is. You’re not doing anyone any service by worrying so. Rest.*

Apollo decided, not for the first time, to take his sister's advice. In the relative cool of the next morning, the ruins proved to be just as Cain had described them. Only some outcroppings of weathered stone were visible, badly eroded and overgrown by vines and jungle growth. A quick sensor scan showed that what was visible was only about a quarter of the total settlement; most of the other structures were hidden completely beneath the encroaching jungle, as Poseidon rushed to reclaim its own. What he saw now might once have been a beautiful, populous place, Apollo realized, but that day was long gone.

"Archaeology's not my field of study," Tigh said, "but these don't seem to be the leavings of a technological race, human or otherwise."

"Cain said these were the nearest ruins, not the only ones," Apollo said.

"Maybe he based the decision to colonize on another site." Privately, however, he had to agree with Tigh's words. The site, what he could see of it beneath the obscuring mantle of jungle growth, seemed to be the work of only moderately advanced people. Broken stone walls ringed shallow depressions that might once, long ago, have been foundations, but those walls were metrons-thick barriers, obviously the bases of walls that had been constructed to bear their own weight, rather than rely on an internal framework. There was no indication, however faint, of metal pipes or wiring, or even the places where those might have been.

"Maybe Cain was wrong," Cassie said. "Maybe they were native to this planet and not true humans at all. Every colony world we've encountered started at the technological level of their original colonists, and built from there. They don't turn their backs on…"

Her words trailed off into silence and she looked faintly embarrassed as Gar'Tokk grunted softly, just loud enough to be heard against the rustling backdrop of the local jungle, but not so loudly that any real meaning could be read into the sound.

Apollo grinned lightly. "Some do," he said. "GarTokk, here, is proof of that. But where Borellus's followers succeeded, these failed."

"Apparently," Tigh said. He had clambered over one of the crumbled walls. Diogenes, a balding, pudgy man who was an erstwhile member of Cain's science staff, helped Tigh pull a layer of overgrowth from the broken stone's interior surface.

"What do you think, Diogenes?" Apollo asked. "You must have studied this place before. You've been on-planet for ten yahren." Diogenes shook

his head. “This is my first visit here,” he said. “I studied archeology, paleontology, and related disciplines on Scorpia, but Commander Cain thinks my time is better spend running a magnalift. He allows me little time for field studies.” He tugged a vine, hard, and an intertwined mass of creepers and tendrils came away from the stone block, bringing chips and fragments with it. A swarm of crawling insects scrambled for cover as he examined what he had revealed.

“A simple sedimentary conglomerate, like most of the native strata, and too young to have benefited from metamorphic pressure,” he said. “Soft and easy to work, but it crumbles easily. This entire continent was seabed a million yahren or so ago, after all. I’m surprised that these ruins have lasted at all, made out of this stuff.”

“What about the technological level?” Apollo asked. “Why don’t we see any signs of a colonial civilization? Could they truly have fallen so far?” Gar’Tokk grunted again, but this time, Apollo ignored him.

“You’re asking questions I can’t answer,” Diogenes said. “I haven’t been able to gather any meaningful amount of data. I don’t know when these people lived, or when they died out, if this place was advanced by their standards or if it was primitive. I don’t even know for a fact that they were true humans, though others are convinced.”

“They were human,” Apollo said softly, but with complete assurance. If pressed, he could not have explained the reasoning behind his judgment, or justified his absolute confidence, but he was suddenly certain that human hands had build this dead city.

“Apollo!” Cassie cried out. “Over here!” His reverie broken, Apollo blinked in surprise and stared in the general direction of Cassiopeia’s voice. While he had conversed with Diogenes, Cassie and the others had made their way to the remnants of the central obelisk that Cain had mentioned the previous day.

“Over here!” Cassie repeated, and gestured. “You’ll want to see this!” As he and Gar’Tokk approached it, Apollo was struck by the artifact’s ambitious scale. Even in its present, sadly abbreviated form, the obelisk was big, with a base cross-section of perhaps twenty metrons on a side. To judge from the angles of vertical sides, the thing had once stretched skyward perhaps four times the span of its base width, which seemed appropriate for the construction techniques. More than half the obelisk’s mass was gone

now, the rising pylon of stone truncated some thirty metrons above Apollo's head.

As he joined them, the others were in the process of peeling back more of the clinging vines and creepers from the obelisk's face. Already, a sizeable area was relatively clear, and Tigh was tearing at another webbed mass of vines.

"Carefully! Carefully!" Diogenes said, agitated and nervous. "You'll damage them!"

Stepping closer, Apollo saw the object of Diogenes' concern. The exposed stone was surprisingly intact, and showed little sign of damage from the elements or from the overgrowth. Instead, Tigh's efforts had revealed something else.

Images.

The stone was marked, but not by roots or erosion. Instead, a twisting network of lines and symbols etched its surface, interweaving loops and whorls that might have been a written language, interspersed with surprisingly sophisticated images that even an untrained eye could read. Most of them depicted easily recognized figures that stood erect, with two arms and two legs arrayed on a bilaterally symmetrical frame.

"They were human, all right. At the very least, humanoid," Apollo said. He touched the stone. It was still relatively cool, both from the night and from its long concealment beneath the undergrowth, but something more than mere temperature greeted his touch. There was a strange sensation that he could not fully identify, a feeling of great age and yet, great urgency, a tactile message that he initially ascribed to his own heightened sensitivities.

"You feel it too?" Cassie murmured, surprising him. "At first, I thought it was just my imagination, but the others confirmed it. It's as if the stone were trying to speak to us."

Apollo, his fingers now tracing one of the engraved pictograms, looked at her in surprise. Cassie was not of pure Kobollian blood, and there was no reason for him to suspect her of possessing even a trace of the enhanced aptitudes that were flowering within him. If she felt it…

"Tigh?" he asked.

The other man nodded—he had felt the strange sensation, too.

"Something about the stone," Diogenes said. "They must have treated its surface in some way. I've read of such things, psycho-chemical glazes

that convey primal meanings, but nothing else we've seen here suggests such a sophisticated culture."

Apollo had to wonder about that. The pylon's stone differed from the other stuff he had seen, more finely grained and smooth to the touch. Certainly, it was tougher. Had the structure originated during a later stage in the culture? Or were the surrounding ruins younger? Did the disparity reflect development, or decay?

He stepped back a bit and looked at the exposed surface, then shifted his head slightly, so that the sun's rays reflected from the rock at a slightly different angle. The rock glinted back at him.

"It looks almost metallic," Apollo said.

"It can't be," Diogenes returned. "None of the other ruins…"

"It looks metallic," Apollo repeated. "Not metal, metallic. As if the surface had been treated with metallic salts. Maybe that's the why it feels so strange."

"That would correlate with my studies," Diogenes said, his voice tight now, with the excitement of a scholar who has made a major find. "The ruins on Qorax…"

Gar'Tokk had lent his considerable strength to Tigh's efforts now, and was ripping more and more of the tangled vines free. Already, they lay in tangled heaps that mounded to his knees. Diogenes started to complain, but ceased as it became obvious that their work was doing no harm to the ancient stone. Whatever treatment had given the obelisk's surface its sheen had made it resistant to the vines, as well. None of the rootlets had done and damage to the stone they covered. Apollo noticed that and mentally filed away the information for later.

The images demanded his immediate attention.

Dozens, scores, hundreds of the human figures covered the newly revealed surface, none larger than the spread of Apollo's hand. Interspersed among them were other pictograms, angular images that mimicked profiles that were familiar. Apollo needed a moment to recognize them, however, because the anonymous artists who had created them apparently had little concern for the niceties of scale and perspective, but he managed.

They were starships, recognizable in type if not specific make. Frigates, barges, merchant liners, and warships rode, not the currents of space, but the glistening stone surface of the ancient obelisk.

“This was definitely a human colony,” Tigh said, apparently making the same connection that Apollo had. “I can’t read the writing, but the pictures make it plain.”

Apollo nodded. “Yes, I think we can take that as certain,” he said in a distracted tone of voice. He stepped closer to the obelisk again. One group of starship images in particular called to him, a swarm of engravings set off from all the others. They had a familiar, angular shape, and they glinted even more brightly than the other markings. As he approached, the relative angle at which they reflected the sunlight back to him changed yet again, and they suddenly shone like diamonds.

As if made from light.

Apollo touched the stone again, tracing its surface and contours. The same, unsettling sensation seeped from the stone and into his fingertips. It ebbed as his digits found the brightest pictograms. The glaze’s effect was different there, and a sudden sense of peace and tranquility flowed through him.

“The Ships of Light,” he said softly, thunderstruck by his discovery.

“They knew them, or knew of them.”

“All that’s missing is a Cylon or two,” Tigh said sourly. “I don’t know whether to be pleased or disappointed.”

“Step over here, then,” Cassiopeia said. “Maybe this will satisfy you.” Gar’Tokk had continued clearing the stone. More images had come into view. Now, Cassie gestured at a cluster of pictograms. They showed human forms, arrayed in heaps scarcely less tangled than the vines at Gar’Tokk’s feet. But at the apex of that heap was something very strange. It was a figure, a bit larger than the human ones, and radically different in design. A huge figure with no discernible head. Four limbs sprouted from the figure’s torso, but they appeared to be arms, not legs. Where the legs would have been was a single, fused appendage that supported the strange creature.

“Touch it,” Cassie said.

Apollo complied, and felt suddenly cold, despite the fast-building heat of the day. Waves of menace seemed to radiate from the carved image, almost palpable in their power. Apollo was reasonably certain that he felt it more strongly than the others did, thanks to his training in the ways of Kobol, but there was no denying that ancient artisans had put the message in the stone for all to perceive. Coming so soon after the reassuring contact

with the Ships of Light imagery, the impact of this new sigil was made even greater by the contrast.

“These people may not have known the Cylons,” he said. “But they seem to have had enemies of their own.”

The bridge of the *Galactica* could be a quiet place, even at its busiest; the work done there required concentration and skill. Now, during light cycle, it was almost peaceful, as navigators plotted their tracks and confirmed them, as ship’s engineers ran and tested command sequences, and as surveillance teams took their readings. The illumination had been cut and the only sounds to be heard were softly murmuring voices and the occasional chirp of a computer completing its work.

Athena loved it here, loved it as her father, Adama, had loved it. Here is where that complex web of custom and command, of process and protocol came together. The bridge of the *Galactica* was not just the nerve center but also the heart of the fleet that surrounded it. Athena came here often, even off-duty. The huge monitor screens and the starfields they displayed emphasized for her the vastness of space, while the low-key bustle of the crew served as a constant reminder of the *Galactica’s* place in the cosmos. A mere centon ago, she had stepped from the ascensior, acknowledged the salutes of the on-duty personnel, and the settled into a vacant seat where she could observe but not disturb.

A moment later, Star buck had joined her.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” the fighter pilot said, showing strong white teeth set in an amiable grin. “I thought I would find you here.” Athena took no offense at his casual manner. Starbuck was not only her brother’s friend but hers, as well—much more than a friend, actually—and he would never be one to take much note of her new role and authority, unless circumstances made her force the issue.

“It *is* pretty,” she responded. “It’s good to know that you can see its charms, too.”

Starbuck shrugged. “Well,” he said, “I wouldn’t want it be common knowledge. But sometimes, after I’ve logged enough centons in a Viper, it’s reassuring to come here and see just what I’m fighting for.”

“That’s not why you’re here now,” Athena said. “Is it?” Again, Starbuck grinned, and again, he shrugged. “You know me too well,” he said. “I wanted to know how things were going on Poseidon. Has Apollo reported yet?”

“About ten centons ago,” Athena said. “The local evening. Cain’s colony runs on a different clock than we do.”

“Like that’s a surprise,” Starbuck snorted.

Athena ignored the comment. Instead of responding, she gave him a quick precis of Apollo’s report, even providing some details that protocol demanded she reserve for the Quorum. After all, it had been Starbuck who, with Apollo, had retrieved the celestial holomap they followed now, and he deserved to know the fruits of his labor.

“Dictatorship, huh?” Starbuck said as she finished. “That sound like Cain, all right. When’s Apollo coming back?”

“After he visits the ruins,” Athena said. “That should be morning, local time—just about now.”

A klaxon sounded, a loud, shrieking wail that shattered the air of tranquility. Surveillance team members shouted readings to one another, each call more agitated than the one before. The bridge illuminators flared to full life.

“What is it?” Athena snapped, all casualness falling away as she took up once more the reins of command. “Omega! Status report!”

“We don’t know yet, Colonel,” the tall, elderly man said. “Scanners register armed craft moving into range. Numbering forty, climbing fast.” Athena felt a cold fist clutch her heart. To have come so far, and make such gains, only to be discovered now by an enemy…

“Cylons?” she said.

The image on the viewscreens blossomed as scores of red flashes interspersed themselves among the stars that shone there. Forty splashes of blood-red appeared, and Athena knew that each indicated an armed spacecraft, presumed hostile.

“No, not Cylons,” Omega said. “Profiles don’t match, energy signature is all wrong.”

Athena noticed that Starbuck was gone now, vanished silently. No doubt he was on his way to the launch bay.

“Shields up,” she said, calm and assured as she took charge of the situation. “Mobilize Red Squadron, under Captain Hecate. Return fire if necessary, but don’t initiate it. I want all weapons systems at the ready, and all stations secure ten microns ago. And, Omega—”

“Yes, Colonel?”

“Find out who’s flying those ships!”

Chapter Eight

THE QUARTERS THAT CAIN HAD ASSIGNED APOLLO were austere

in the extreme, scarcely more space than needed to enclose a narrow bed and locker. There was not even enough room for Gar'Tokk; the previous night, the Noman had stood sentry in the corridor, where he waited now. A single illuminator hung from the chamber's ceiling. It lit four plain and windowless walls, simple pseudocrete-block barriers that were joined with mortar and broken only by the single doorway. This was not a place to meet or entertain, but only to rest and study.

For the moment, it suited Apollo. Tigh had reported back to the *Galactica*, and Cassie had gone to dine with Cain. No pressing matters demanded Apollo's immediate attention, and he had the privacy he needed.

Legs folded, he sat in the middle of his bed and composed himself, willing his heartbeat and breathing to slow. This was not the *Galactica* and this was not the Kobollian sanctuary chamber where he customarily performed his mental exercises, but this chamber was more than adequately isolated for basic meditation. The past two days had been tumultuous ones, filled with encounters to review and new knowledge to ponder. He could do that best after finding inner tranquility. He had dimmed the illuminator so that now only wan light reached his eyes, not enough to distract him from his exercises. He gazed at the pseudocrete wall before him, considering the mildly irregular texture of its surface, and the beads of mortar that bound the bricks together. The wall itself did not offer much for him to see, so he concentrated some more, and looked past the barrier.

Looked with his mind, not his eyes. Looked not only out, but within himself, so that he could perceive the reality that waited beyond his five basic senses.

Now it seemed to Apollo that he could see the starfield beyond Poseidon's soupy atmosphere, feel the ethereal winds of the cosmos, unmindful of the world's gravitational pull. Reality—accessed by his heightened perceptions, trained in the ways of Kobol.

He could see the *Galactica*, or the clump of memories that represented it in his mind, and he could see the many ships of the fleet surrounding her.

And then, suddenly, he could see something more.

What he experienced now was more than a memory, Apollo realized, as he considered the new form that his inner eye beheld. It was another kind of spacecraft, of a class that he had never seen before. Long and lean, it was a spindle shape with ends that came to cruel points. Cool waves of hostility and menace radiated from the alien construct.

Apollo!

The mental cry exploded in his mind like a bomb, so sudden and emphatic that he felt it like a physical blow. The *Galactica*, the starfield, all of the mental images began to dissolve as Athena's mental call thundered through him with a power and clarity only hinted at in their previous communications. He could sense the desperation and urgency in her mental "tone."

Athena? What is it? What's wrong? Apollo responded, and a grim foreboding chilled his bones. *Are you under attack*? *War ships*, she returned to him. *At least thirty, maybe more. Sensors say they're armed. They came out of nowhere. Yes, more. They keep coming*.

Cylons? Apollo asked, but even as he asked, he knew that the answer would be negative. Had the Cylons found them, especially in such numbers, there would have been no time for Athena's urgent warning. *Unknown make, unknown profile, unknown energy signature*, his sister responded. The clarity of her sending faded slightly now, as if some of her attention were directed elsewhere. *No exchange of fire yet, but they're englobing us. Vipers deployed, defensive formation*, she continued.

Apollo could not tell if her last words were directed at him, or simply mental echoes of a verbal comment made to someone else.

Forty ships, and the number is holding steady now, Athena told him. *Small, but still bigger than a Viper. Strangest design I've ever seen. Fast, too. No clear images on optical scan. Hard to get a fix on any individual vessel, but the swarm is hard to miss. They've taken up a globular formation around us. Hostile positioning, but no attempts at communication so far*.

Be careful! Apollo urged his sister. *Don't initiate hostilities! You don't know who the intruders are, or what they can do*! Frustration and helplessness swept over him like twin tidal waves. To be here on the planet's surface, so far from his fleet when it faced an unknown menace, was the seasoned warrior's worst nightmare.

This time, Athena's mental voice took on a faint note of wry amusement, despite the urgency and concern she still radiated. *I've said the same to you more than once*, she told him. *I'll keep to my own counsel, thank you. Main batteries at the ready…* This time, the words that she formed in Apollo's mind were definitely echoes of her own thoughts, not deliberate communications but more like mental

"background noise." They trailed off into an incomprehensible mental whisper, and then the mental contact broke.

Had Athena turned her attention to other matters…or had something worse happened?

"More ambrosa?" Cain asked, raising the flagon and reaching for Cassiopeia's glass. They were in Cain's private quarters, scarcely more luxurious than any on the planet, but large enough to accommodate a dining table and, now, a guest.

Cassie shook her head and placed her long, slender fingers above the opening of her glass in the universal gesture of refusal. "I've had enough for now," she said. The ambrosa, mildly euphoric under normal circumstances, had affected her more strongly than usual, and she felt something close to giddiness as her host smiled and returned the flagon to its rest.

"You're quiet," Cain noted. "Tired from your day at the ruins?"

"Yes," Cassie said, and her response was only half an untruth. The trip to the old settlement *had* exhausted her. "We spend two centons clambering over stones and tangled vines."

But she felt more than simple fatigue. She was attracted to Cain and always had been, despite the age difference between them. Here was a fierce warrior's heart, not entirely unlike Starbuck's, yet different. Many yahren of experience and accomplishment had honed and refined the legendary commander's spirit, so that it combined intensity with discipline, and charm with power.

Cain grunted softly. "Too much time spent with the dead past," he said.

"It's the present that demands out attention."

"'Study the past, or be destined to repeat it'," Cassie quoted. "Adama told me that once."

"I don't believe in destiny, you know," Cain said, an untypical tenderness suddenly coloring his voice. "At least, not the kind of destiny

that scholars and seers argue. I believe in the destiny that men make for themselves, with fire and blood and sweat."

Cassie wasn't sure how to respond to that.

"But I find myself forced to reconsider," Cain continued, and set his eating utensils aside. "After nearly twenty yahren, in all the trackless cosmos, the *Galactica* and the *Pegasus* crossed trajectories once more, and found each other again."

Cassiopeia smiled. "You're not just talking about battlestars, are you?" He reached for her hand, found it. "No, I'm not." Cassie didn't pull back.

"It's enough to make me reconsider my opinion of destiny," Cain said softly. He gazed at her. "I wonder if you feel the same." His eyes were the cold gray of saligium, but there was a smoldering fire to them, Cassie realized. It was the kind of fire that might light a much younger man's eyes, yet somehow different. They were eyes that had seen much, sights as far beyond her ken as—

The door to Cain's quarters tore free from its frame and splintered fragments flew as a booted foot shattered the flimsy wood. Apollo stood framed in the doorway, with Gar'Tokk behind him. Cain stood bolt upright, and a different kind of fire filled his gray eyes.

"By the Lords, Apollo! Explain yourself, and now!" the older man snapped.

"Shout all you like, Cain!" Apollo responded. "You're the one who owes us all an explanation! Explain the vessels that have taken up a formation around the—around *my* fleet!"

"Eh? I've heard no—I would have been notified if any such event…" Cain's words trailed off for a moment, and then he composed himself.

"How do you know of such things? My staff would have alerted me of any distress call, even on a private frequency."

Apollo didn't answer, an omission that Cassiopeia found oddly significant. Much about her long-time friend had changed in recent months, not all of it easily explained by his rise to power and new maturity. There were times when Apollo's presence projected a new wisdom and power that reminded her greatly of his father.

Times like now.

"Forty ships, Cain, and from the size of them, native to this system. They just aren't big enough for interstellar travel. I want to know where

they come from, and who pilots them, and I want to know now!" Apollo said angrily.

Cain snorted. "Don't try to pull rank on me, stripling," he said. "I *give* orders, not *take* them!"

Gar'Tokk had entered the now-crowded room, close on the heels of Apollo. Now, the Noman made a rumbling thunder somewhere deep in his barrel chest, and his lips pulled back to reveal strong white teeth. Apollo gestured at him for silence, then looked back at Cain.

"Tell me," he ordered the older man. "I won't let your pride get in the way of my learning what I need to know. Who mans those vessels? Who are they, and what do they want?"

An odd expression passed over Cain's lean features, a look of momentary confusion. As it passed, Apollo spoke again.

"Who are the Chitain?" he asked now.

"How do you know that name? Who flouted my orders?" Cain demanded.

Apollo didn't answer that question either. Instead, he rephrased his own, anger giving emphasis to each syllable as he uttered his query with anger-blanched lips. "Who are they?"

"Sentient species, indigenous to this system," Cain said reluctantly.

"Not Poseidon. They don't like it here. Too wet for their taste." Apollo glared at him.

"Good fighters," Cain continued, warming to his topic. "We had a few skirmishes with them before we made planetfall, before I made it clear to them that we weren't interested in their territory. Their world is a desert."

"What do they look like?" Apollo asked.

"Big brutes, a head or two taller than you," Cain said. "With exoskeletons. They look something like crawlons, after a few million yahren of evolution."

"Four arms?" Cassie said softly, thinking back to the pictograms in the ruins. "And they use a tail for locomotion?"

Cain nodded. "Someone's been talking too much," he said grimly. Cassiopeia shook her head, began to explain, but Apollo interrupted.

"Never mind that," he said grimly. "You hid this from us. Why?"

"There was no need for you to know," Cain said. "The Chitain are no menace, now that they know our interests are not theirs. I didn't want you hearing about them and drawing the wrong conclusions."

“You didn’t want anything that might discourage the *Galactica’s* citizens from joining your colony, you mean,” Apollo said sourly. “I can see what you’ve done with the manpower available. You must have known what you could accomplish with a doubled population.” Cain nodded eagerly. “Together, we could—”

“And you knew that we would never settle here, with these things infesting the system,” Apollo continued. “You would have risked the life of every man, woman and child in the *Galactica’s* fleet to accomplish your goals.”

“The Chitain are no menace, I tell you,” Cain said. “We don’t compete. If anything, they’re potential allies against the Cylons!” Apollo looked at him, so coldly that ice seemed to form on his handsome features. “Commander Cain,” he said, emphasizing the title in a way that sounded almost mocking. “Since entering this system, my people have lost two of our best fighter pilots. One of those pilots was your own daughter, Sheba… who was to be my wife.”

Cain looked at him levelly. “There are many hazards in exploring a system, Apollo,” he said. “Unmapped meteor flows, magnetic storms, solar interference. Any of them can cause tech problems.”

Apollo nodded. “And I was almost willing to blame Sheba’s disappearance on one of them, until now. Until I learned that this system is occupied by armed hostiles, capable of interplanetary travel,” he said.

“Not hostiles,” Cain said doggedly. “Potential allies.” Apollo suddenly looked very tired, and much older than his yahren.

“You should have considered the fate of your predecessors,” he said grimly. Quickly, he told Cain of the ruined city and the pictograms his party had seen there. “Tell me, Commander,” he concluded, “do you typically make camp in a lupus den?”

“The Chitain are *not* a threat!” Cain snapped. “I would ask no more of my people than I demand of myself!”

“All that means is that you expect your followers to be as blind as you are,” Apollo responded. “Blind to everything except the Cylon menace. So wrapped in your own hate that you can’t see anything else anymore.”

“Apollo,” Cassie said, “that’s not fair!” Cain glanced at her. “I’ll wage my own wars,” he said stiffly.

“Not fair, but true,” Apollo said.

Cain continued. “I’m confident that the Chitain wish to ally themselves with us,” he said. “In fact, I’ve been invited to lead a diplomatic mission to their homeworld!”

“Rulers don’t typically play at being diplomats,” Apollo said slowly.

“Nor do warriors. Typically.”

“I would ask no more of my people than I demand of myself,” Cain repeated.

Apollo glared at him.

“You’re not going,” he said to Cain. “I am.”

“Impossible.”

Apollo continued, as if he had not spoken. “I’ll go, and I’ll take my two best Warriors with me.”

“Impossible,” Cain repeated. “I won’t allow it.”

“If you don’t cooperate,” Apollo said, “I won’t, in this or in anything else. Is that really a price you’re willing to pay?”

Athena gestured at the huge view screen before her. The image it held was a live feed from the main tactical computers, an animated diagram of the current fleet configuration. It showed the *Galactica*, ringed by a halo of smaller vessels, the warships and agro-ships and other craft that were the mighty battlestar’s fleet and protectorates. They hung close to the mammoth *Galactica*, remaining near enough to be protected by its laser cannons and defensive weaponry, and yet carefully placed to avoid blocking the Viper launch tubes. Shields and armor and turbolasers were the *Galactica’s* last line of defense; the Vipers were its first, and to block their egress from or ingress to the larger ship would have been tantamount to signing the fleet’s death warrant.

Now, less than a quarter of the Vipers were deployed in the space surrounding the fleet, enough to make a show of power, but not enough to expose the *Galactica’s* main defensive capability to destruction unnecessarily.

Beyond the *Galactica*, beyond the fleet and the Vipers that ringed, hung the globular formation of the mystery ships.

Or, as Apollo had told her they were named, the Chitain.

“Still no hostile moves on their part,” Athena said to her brother, who stood beside her now in a secluded corner of the bridge. Apollo had returned to the *Galactica* from Poseidon, and briefed her on what he had found at the ruins, and on what Cain had finally told him.

“Did they give you any trouble on the way back?” she asked him. Apollo shook his head. “The Chitain formation opened enough to allow my shuttle safe passage,” he said, “then returned to its previous configuration. No answer on any hailing frequencies, even though Cain says they’ve figured out our language.”

“Maybe they’re waiting.”

“Waiting for what?”

“I don’t know,” Athena said with unaccustomed testiness. “Waiting for something to happen, waiting for orders from their superiors, waiting for us to surrender. I don’t know. I *can’t* know!”

“None of us can,” Apollo said gently.

“They just hang there, watching us, observing. It might be a show of power, it might be a systematic surveillance. They let us observe them, too. Vipers can come within extreme laser range, but not close enough to strike reliably.”

“How did you find that out? I thought you weren’t going to initiate hostilities,” Apollo said.

Athena shook her head. “I wasn’t,” she said. “I didn’t. Starbuck did. That’s why I recalled him from the reconnaissance run and reassigned him onboard supervisory duty. For the moment.”

Apollo thought with grim amusement of his long-time friend. Playing feint-and-parry with an unknown enemy was typical Starbuck behavior.

“Maybe he wanted to see how good they are,” Apollo said.

“That’s exactly what he wanted to see,” Tigh interjected. “His assessment: ‘They’re good. Maybe too good.’ “

The quoted words gave Apollo pause. They weren’t the sort of comment he associated with the daredevil fighter pilot.

“Good, or fast?” Apollo asked.

“Both,” Tigh continued. “In normal space, at least, they move faster than a Viper, but that’s just a matter of engine power and mass/fuel ratios. They have the skill to go with the speed, though, and the wits to use it.”

“Do they have QSE capability, or anything like it?” Apollo asked.

“They’ve shown no sign of it,” Athena said.

Tigh said, “But we don’t know that they don’t. We haven’t gone quantum in their vicinity. They’re so curious about us, it makes sense to keep some mysteries our own. That was Athena’s directive, by the way.”

“It was a good one,” Apollo said.

“Plutarch says they probably don’t have QSE,” his sister said, ignoring the compliment. “He says it doesn’t fit with their technology profile.”

“It doesn’t fit with ours, either,” Apollo reminded her. A short time before, he and Starbuck had stolen the secret of the Quantum Shift Effect generator from a Cylon base. Plutarch had been among the scientists who had incorporated that new technology into existing fleet vessels.

“There’s corroborating evidence,” Tigh said. “The energy signatures are all wrong.”

“Their speed means we can’t run, even if we wanted to,” Apollo said.

“QSE might be the only chance we have.”

“The Council already thought of that,” Athena said.

“Some people will put a lot of thought into running,” Tigh said.

“Especially once they find out the new neighborhood has nasty neighbors.” The issue of colonization had been set aside until the Chitain situation was resolved…one way or another.

“The Council already thought of that,” Athena repeated. “They also thought of the tactical advantage that QSE gives in battle.” She pushed a button on the control panel before her, and a three-dimensional visual commlink display flared to life. Plutarch’s head nearly filled the display field, his typical inquisitive expression replaced by one that was more harried.

“Who is it? What do you want?” the young scientist asked, annoyance plain in his voice. Behind him, the others could see the equipment of his private laboratory onboard the *Virgon Star*. “I can’t get anything done here if… Oh. Greetings, Colonel Athena, Commander Apollo.”

“Relax, Plutarch,” Athena said. “Just give us a status report and we’ll let you get back to work.”

Plutarch glanced off-view at something, then back at the commlink’s pickup. “We can’t QSE-enable the entire fleet in any reasonable time span,” he said. “The tylium isotope overlays are proving problematic to mass-produce on an accelerated basis.”

“Any other options?” Apollo asked.

“Of course there are,” Plutarch responded, and glanced off-view again.

“I’m working on one now,” he continued. “I recalibrated a test unit so that it produced a space-ripple wake effect that should be able to draw other subordinate craft after it. I think we can outfit the larger vessels with the

modified units, then slave the smaller ones to ride along. I'm testing the approach now."

"How soon do you think you can make it work?" Apollo asked. This time, Plutarch shrugged. "Much sooner, if I could be left in peace to do my work," he said. "To be honest."

Despite himself, Apollo smiled. He remembered well the impertinence of youth. And if ever he forgot it, he knew Starbuck's mere presence would serve as a constant reminder.

"How long?" he repeated.

"Maybe two days," Plutarch said. "No more than three."

"Do it in one," Apollo said. "I'll see to it that you have your privacy." He broke the connection, and the image flickered and disappeared.

"He's good," Athena said.

Apollo nodded.

"A bit too eccentric for my tastes," Tigh said. "But most kid geniuses are. Did you see that fake Cylon he built for himself?" Apollo nodded again. Not only had he seen the Cylon drone, but he had ordered its destruction, for fear of a panic among the fleet populace, most of whom would be terrified just looking at the thing, fake or not. Only Plutarch's impassioned pleas about its scientific value and promises of discretion had saved his toy from the recycle units.

"One day until full QSE capability," Apollo said softly, though he knew that didn't mean all the Vipers would be outfitted. Individual fighter ships couldn't be slaved to others and still be maneuverable, and their priority right now was getting the fleet to safety.

"The diplomatic mission should buy us that much time and more," he added. "Enough to learn a bit about the Chitain. Then we can decide what we do next."

"Diplomatic mission?" Athena said sharply. "You're not still going through with that?"

"I have to," Apollo said. "It's the only way we can find out what we need to know." Silently, he added that it might be the only way to learn Sheba's fate.

"But the fleet needs its leader, at least while we're surrounded!" Apollo looked at his sister, utter seriousness coloring his every word. "I have to go, Athena. The fleet needs its leader, yes, but you've proven yourself as skilled at that as I."

“But—if they attack while you’re on their world…” Apollo shook his head. “I don’t think that will happen, at least, not yet. I think that right now, they’re as curious about us as we are about them. I think that’s why they haven’t attacked yet.” He paused. “They’re waiting to meet us, face to face.”

“They aren’t waiting for you; they’re waiting for Cain,” Tigh said.

“I can’t let Cain be the envoy,” Apollo responded. “He’s blinded himself to everything but what he wants to see. We can’t trust his judgment on the Chitain.”

The astral winds were cold against Valor’s naked skin.

Strictly speaking, there were no winds for him to feel, of course. The hard vacuum of the sea of space knew only the faintest of stellar currents. Valor’s highly evolved senses seized on the faint input available to them, amplified the input to perceivable levels, and then fed it to his brain, which translated it into basic sensation.

Valor was cold.

He was cold because only the faintest hints of solar radiation reached him, and cold because his strength was at its lowest ebb, and cold because of his wounds.

But worst of all was the frigid grasp of fatigue.

He had flown long and far without the aid of engines or armor, driven only by the power of his own mind. Muscle, bone and flesh gave Valor form, but only the power of his mind gave him motion now; his armor’s engine had been left far behind. Naked to the uncaring cosmos, he flew through the vast sea of emptiness at trans-light speeds, his mind tightly focused on two things: the perceived cold that he could not mask out entirely, and the need for flight.

The telekinetic energy that radiated from Valor’s brain pushed against the fabric of space and drove him forward. The urgency of his mission and the duration of his effort had brought him to an impressive speed, nearly as great as the engine his lost armor could have provided. Somewhere far behind him, the Chitain were no doubt finishing their destruction of the Sky embassy on the third moon of Xerik-12. Valor gave them no thought now; that bit of knowledge and the horror that it brought were filed away neatly in a darkened recess of his mind, to be recalled only when necessary.

He had no energy to waste on such considerations now. Nearly every molecule of his being was devoted to his flight. A tiny portion of his

awareness monitored his surroundings, and even that was less to ensure his safety than the success of his mission.

Cold.

The need for flight.

Ahead of him lay DarAvqq, homeworld of the Sky. There, Valor's people waited, ignorant of the Chitain's savage betrayal. They did not know that their offer of friendship had been met only with fire and blood. They did not know of the need for vengeance, that they had a new enemy. Valor would tell them.

Valor drove himself forward. His energy reserves were nearly gone, and each moment brought him closer to total collapse. His wounds were throbbing, but his mind shunted the pain aside and did not let him feel it. The thick, leathery muscles of his "wings" were tight and aching, but the sensation never reached his consciousness, which still knew only two concepts.

Cold.

The need for flight.

He was blind to all else now, so blind that when the familiar wavelengths of solar radiation finally came, it took him long moments to recognize them. They splashed against him, gained in power as their source grew closer, and finally became too strong to ignore. The pale rays of DarAvqq's sun shone on him now.

Relief swept though Valor, and finally, at long last, he allowed himself to know again more than cold, more than the urgency of his journey. Sensation filled his brain again as, one by one, he allowed himself to acknowledge the urgent messages of his senses. Pain filled him, from the cruel injuries his enemies had inflicted. Fatigue filled him, from muscle and mind that had been drained to their breaking point. The pain and the fatigue were welcome now, spurs to encourage him, fuel for the third sensation that flooded his very being: fury.

Daravqq was below him now, the familiar blue and gray of his home hanging like exotic jewelry in orbit around its sun. Already, Valor could feel the first, faint fringes of its atmosphere. More, he could feel the thoughts of his brothers, and knew that they could feel his.

Betrayal! Valor shrieked with his mind, both as an alarm and as an exhortation to vengeance. *We have been betrayed*!

We have been betrayed, and the Chitain must know our vengeance!

“I don’t like it,” Starbuck said. He moved his fumarello to one corner of his mouth and scowled as he studied the unfamiliar navi-hilt. He was wearing his helm but had not powered it yet, so the blue plume of smoke that oozed from his pursed lips spilled over into the general cabin area.

“You don’t like anything that’s not your idea,” Boomer said grimly.

“And you don’t like anything that you can’t shoot out of the sky.”

“Not true,” Starbuck said. This time he grinned, an expression that seemed more at home on his handsome features. “Women weren’t my idea, and neither were ambrosa or Pyramid, and there’s not much point in shooting any of them.”

Boomer scowled now. “I’ll shoot you if you don’t put out that fumarello,” he said. “You’re on duty now.”

“Yes, sir, Major, sir!” Starbuck said mockingly, but he extinguished the smoke all the same as he continued studying the controls.

Apollo watched him patiently, trying hard not to smile. Despite the gravity of the situation, he never failed to find his friend’s banter amusing. Even Boomer, who sometimes claimed to have no sense of humor, had fallen easily into the role of straight man for Starbuck’s japes. The three of them, along with Gar’Tokk, sat in the cockpit of the *Starlight*, a small battle cruiser that was part of Cain’s new fleet. A shuttlecraft had ferried them to the shipyard in orbit around Poseidon after Cain had placed the cruiser at their disposal for the diplomatic mission.

“Status,” Apollo said, prompting Starbuck.

“Everyone wants to pull rank, that’s the status,” his friend responded.

“Ship status,” Apollo amended.

“Oh,” Starbuck said. “Good. Cain’s people do good work. I still don’t see why we’re taking this boat, though, instead of one of our own.” Apollo shook his head. “Cain got us into this, so we’ll risk *his* assets. Plus, this vessel will seem less of a threat than a quartet of Vipers, even though it’s got more firepower.”

Starbuck looked at him with an expression of disbelief. “Am I to believe,” he said, “that you don’t view *me* as an asset to the fleet? Is that why I’m here?”

Apollo sighed. “No more joking, Starbuck,” he said. “You’re here because you’re the best pilot I have.”

“Hmph.” Starbuck powered up his helm and grunted in satisfaction as its energy field winked into being.

Apollo glanced at each of his companions in turn. “And all of you are here because there is no one in the entire fleet I would rather have at my side in a battle,” he continued, and thought he saw the edges of Gar’Tokk’s lips curl up slightly, tempting a smile.

“We’re playing for big stakes here,” Apollo continued. “This mission may explain the fate of the first colony on Poseidon. It will determine the fate of the current one, and whether any of us can find new homes there.”

“These Chitain are tough,” Starbuck said, “but they’re no Cylons.”

“They don’t have to be,” Boomer said. “This is their home ground, remember? And besides, we don’t need any new enemies.”

Chapter Nine

I’M GLAD YOU CONVINCED ME to come down to the ODOC,” Athena said, and took a long draught from her tankard of ale.

Cassiopeia smiled. “I know you. I’m sure you don’t want to leave the bridge for a micron, not with all that’s happening now. But if you don’t get some rest, you’re not going to be much use to anyone.” Athena nodded ponderously. She let out a long breath. Cassie was right about that, no question. She’d been on duty nearly two full cycles already, and with Apollo off trying to keep the Chitain from obliterating the fleet—a feat they seemed fully capable of achieving— Athena was practically buzzing with adrenaline. She didn’t want to just leave the bridge in Omega’s hands only, competent as they were.

On the other hand, it would be nice to be somewhere the members of the Council would leave her alone for a few centons.

“You’re right,” Athena confirmed. “But I wouldn’t have been able to get any sleep at all if I had just gone straight to my quarters.” There was a brief silence between the two women then. Each was alone with her thoughts, and that was all right with Athena. There were many reasons they should not be friends, but over time, those reasons had seemed less and less important. Now they were very comfortable with one another.

As long as Starbuck wasn’t around.

“I hope they’re all right,” Cassiopeia said, almost to herself. Athena looked at her in surprise. Of course Athena herself was concerned for the members of the embassy that had been sent to the Chitain homeworld. Her brother was among them, and her lover as well. Boomer had been her friend and loyal to her family since Apollo and Starbuck’s Academy days. Gar’Tokk she wasn’t at all concerned about—he lived to die on the field of battle.

Yet, though Athena worried, she didn’t dwell on it. These were Colonial Warriors. They knew what they were doing. If a crisis arose, she would deal with it in turn. It was a waste of time to fret about what might happen when there was enough to occupy their time in the here and now. Preparing the fleet to fight the Chitain—if it came to that—was foremost on her mind at the moment.

“I’m sure they’ll be all right,” Athena said, almost dismissively, though she didn’t want to insult Cassie. “They always are.”

“Which means their odds of continued success are going down,” Cassiopeia said, narrowing her eyes as she looked speculatively at Athena.

“You’re not worried about them at all? About your brother? About… about Starbuck?”

Athena shook her head and ran her right hand through her dark hair. It was a gesture she often made when frustrated, and all those close *to* her could identify the emotion in it.

“What?” Cassie asked.

With a small laugh, Athena stared at her. “I try not to think about it, Cassiopeia. Thanks for pushing the issue.”

Cassie grimaced. “Sorry. I guess I just wanted someone to share my fears with.”

“Do you know what bothers me the most?” Athena asked. “That they shouldn’t even be there. If Cain had a single diplomatic bone in his body, he would have resolved this relationship with the Chitain yahren ago. But it wasn’t enough to have peace with them, he needed them as allies in war against the Cylons. And then, of course, he was duplicitous enough to try to keep Poseidon’s situation secret in order to boost his own population with the fleet’s civilians.

“I have to say, I blame him for anything that happens to Starbuck and Apollo. Not to mention that he doesn’t seem very upset that Sheba is probably dead. You’d think his own daughter…”

Athena saw the flush of Cassie’s cheeks and the angry slits that were her eyes, and let her words trail off. The two women stared at one another.

“What?” Athena asked at length.

“First of all, you shouldn’t presume to understand how Cain feels about his daughter. People grieve in their own ways, Athena, as I would think you’d know. Simply because Cain has a more militaristic attitude… Maybe he’s right—have you ever considered that?”

Now Cassie got to her feet, leaned in toward Athena.

“Maybe the Cylons will never stop,” Cassiopeia said, her features grim.

“Maybe they’ll keep coming and coming, no matter how long it takes. Maybe there’s nowhere to hide in the whole galaxy. That’s what Cain believes, Athena, and maybe he’s right.”

Cassiopeia began to turn her back on Athena, but the colonel wasn't about to let her leave on that note.

"You really buy into that line of feldergarb? Are you out of your fracking mind?" Athena snapped.

She glanced around, suddenly aware of the hush in the ODOC. The bartender was staring at her but quickly looked away. A pair of servitors whispered to one another in the far corner. There were very few patrons in the room, she saw with some relief.

When Athena spoke again, she had lowered her voice considerably, but she had not failed to notice the smoldering fury her words had stoked in Cassie's eyes.

"Cain wants revenge," Athena whispered harshly. "Pure and simple. His hatred of the Cylons taints his judgment. That much is obvious. I understand his feelings. But I would not endanger what little remains of the human race for the sake of my own fragile ego!"

Cassiopeia glared at her. "You don't know him," she said evenly, her voice loud but not a shout. "You don't know anything about him. Not really."

"I think I know him well enough," Athena replied coldly. "I know that his twisted logic has sent the people closest to me into a high-risk situation that could have been avoided. The entire *fleet* is at risk because of him.

"Maybe it's you who doesn't care?" Athena suggested. "If your feelings for Cain blind you to the danger of the man's obsession, I can almost understand that. But what about Starbuck? He's father to your daughter, for the Lords' sake. No matter what's happened with the three of us, he's loved you—at least with the other half of his heart, the half that I can never touch—since the day he first laid eyes on you. Don't you care what happens to him?"

Cassie shot Athena a final, withering look and snarled, "He chose you, Athena. In the end, he always chose you. I guess that means it's up to you to worry about him."

Cassiopeia turned and stormed from the club.

"Wonderful," Athena whispered to herself. "Now I'm never going to get to sleep."

As she rode the ascensior that would take her to the level of her lab and her quarters, Cassiopeia began to weep in silence. There was a horrible

tightness in her chest, a cold in her gut that was almost too much to bear. She did care, and that was the hell of it.

Most of what Athena had said was probably true. She didn't know anymore. Cain had been a joyful part of a past Cassie wasn't very proud of. He was a sweet memory. But at a time when day-to-day life consisted of hard work and desperate hopes for the future, there were too few sweet memories to cling to. And even fewer joys in her life: her work, and the pride she took in it. And her daughter, of course. Dalton was everything to her.

Cassiopeia worried, not merely for Starbuck and her daughter, but for them all—the entire fleet, and the human colony on Poseidon. The future had never seemed so nebulous. In truth, their chances of having any future at all were in jeopardy.

Which was part of the reason Cassiopeia was so torn. Athena had been right, to a point. Cain's obsession could be the death of the human race…

Or its salvation.

Starbuck stood at the top of the *Starlight's* drop-ramp and looked around with an odd combination of anxiety and wonder. They had set down at an external landing field, not far from where their Chitain escort had landed, that looked like nothing so much as a desert. As he had stepped out of the battle-cruiser into the dim sunlight, Starbuck had been frozen in place for a moment, just staring at the majesty of the Chitain homeworld.

Strangely angled spires gleamed darkly, reflective as black glass, as they stabbed, ridged, and twisted toward the green-hued sky. Starbuck had always been a ladies' man, but he was hardly a romantic. Yet the Chitain city that stretched out before them all was disturbingly beautiful, rising up, as it did, from the endless sands of the planetary surface. But Starbuck's appreciation of the city's aesthetics lasted mere microns. His attention was quickly torn from the surrounding city and focused instead on the landing area around the *Starlight*. His stomach lurched. The hair on the back of his neck prickled and a chill ran through Starbuck as he scanned the welcoming committee the Chitain had put together.

There were *thousands* of them. So many that at first it was difficult for him to focus on those Chitain warriors closest to the cruiser. They seemed to glide toward the ship as the backdraft from its engines finally died down. Their bodies twisted, slithering across the sand with a hideous whisper, a rasp of thick scales.

The Chitain closed in quickly, moving with lightning speed, surrounding the *Starlight* with a wall of armor and flesh and long, thin spiked weapons that Starbuck didn't even want to look at too closely. They stood well over two metrons tall. It was impossible, at first glance, to tell if there were two genders represented. Each warrior's torso was plated with what appeared to be natural armor, like the thick shell of a tortoise, but of a much darker color, a gray-green so deep it was nearly black. Each Chitain had four appendages each, a pair of upper arms that ended in three sharp, slender digits closer to talons than fingers, and a lower pair of thick, enormous pincers that Starbuck knew his subconscious mind would transform into the stuff of nightmares next light cycle.

The arms were a dark, bloody crimson, the color of the rarest gems, as was the lower portion of each Chitain warrior's body. Below the torso, the Chitain were serpentine. They stood upright, of course, but Starbuck had no idea as to the trick of it. It seemed an impossible thing to him, that these creatures should be able to hold themselves up like a humanoid on what was fundamentally a serpent's body, but on a much larger scale. It was that lower trunk that made them seem to glide along on the sand, as they slithered forward much like serpents.

The lower trunk ended in a tail, upraised and equipped with a nasty looking, needle-sharp spine that liked like a scorpion's stinger. Like their ships, Starbuck realized. Propulsion on a Chitain vessel came from the engine strands that emerged from the front of each ship and curved around to the sides, while their weapons' systems emerged from a long

"tail" that hung from the back of the vessel.

Another stinger.

It had taken several microns for Starbuck to look one of the Chitain in the face. Not because he feared them, though he would have to be an absolute mindwipe not to. No, he hadn't looked one of them in the face because it didn't look like much of a face at first.

Though their armor was obviously natural, he had assumed that the featureless shell that seemed almost tucked down between broad shoulders was a helmet of some sort. But no—the flat, wide shell Starbuck was staring at had four thin, slitted eyes, and, at the very bottom of its head, a wide mouth whose teeth flashed menacingly.

Starbuck stared at them, calculating the odds of getting off this rock alive.

“Whose idea was this trip?” he asked aloud, glaring at Apollo, who stood just ahead of him with Gar’Tokk.

At his side, Boomer leaned over slightly and whispered, “I think it was ours,” then tilted his head to indicate the Chitain. “From where I stand, *they* don’t seem all that enthused about our arrival.”

“They sure are ugly little mugjapes, aren’t they?” Starbuck asked in a voice close to a whisper. He didn’t think the Chitain spoke Kobollian, but he didn’t want to start an intergalactic incident either.

As they walked in formation down the ramp, Gar’Tokk glanced over his shoulder and down at Starbuck.

“I’m certain they feel the same way about you, Captain,” the Noman said coolly.

“Me?” Starbuck asked incredulously. “Nah. Have you *seen* these dimples?”

Apollo was aware of Starbuck’s carping. That is to say, he heard it, but he paid no attention to it whatsoever. Instead, he concentrated on the emotional groundswell that was building on the surface of the Chitain world. These creatures, horrid though they appeared, were extremely intelligent and advanced. They looked upon the arrival of the human embassy with a mixture of amusement, disdain, and fascination. It was, after all, a visit from a heretofore unknown alien race.

There was also, he did not fail to notice, a strong current of hostility coming from the Chitain. It came as no surprise to him, however. They were, by the briefest observation, quite obviously an inherently warlike race.

A good thing, then, that Cain was not a part of this diplomatic mission. He and the Chitain were too much alike to do more than try to kill each other.

Apollo’s eyes ticked from one Chitain warrior to the next as he and the rest of the diplomatic party reached the bottom of the drop-ramp. He tried to find one who stood out among them as the obvious leader, or to whom they deferred, but there didn’t seem to be any particular spokesperson for the aliens.

Then he realized that he had been analyzing them through the lens of human expectations. The Chitain did not wear clothing of any kind, so there were none of the accoutrements that might have accompanied rank in

human society. Observing more closely, he noticed a much subtler form of differentiation. Several, actually.

First and foremost, the Chitain were not of one, uniform color. Their armored torsos varied in shade and striation. But more interestingly, they seemed to indulge in some kind of ritual scarring—the number and style of the scars symbolic of something, certainly.

The desert wind whipped past his face, kicking up sand that grated at his flesh and made Apollo squint against the sun and grit. It was warm on the planet, but with none of the humidity of Poseidon.

Finally, his eyes focused on the small group of Chitain who seemed to have separated themselves from the gathered army. Five of them, standing—if their erect position could truly be called standing—in a semi-circle around the bottom of the drop-ramp. One by one, Apollo studied their faces, glancing quickly at the armored chest of each warrior. One had significantly more scarring than the others, and some of those scars seemed to be almost…artistic. As if they had been added for aesthetic purposes. Apollo might not have believed the Chitain capable of appreciating aesthetics if not for the beauty of their architecture. It was to this Chitain warrior that Apollo bowed his head as his feet touched the sand. The alien stood more than a foot taller than Apollo, and another man might have remained on the ramp to keep himself at eye level with the leader of the opposition. Apollo had no such concerns.

"I am Commander Apollo of the Battlestar *Galactica*, here representing the human colony of Poseidon," he began, and then proceeded to introduce the others.

The Chitain officers barely noticed Boomer and Starbuck, keeping their eyes on Apollo except for that briefest of moments when they all glanced at Gar'Tokk. Their faces were, to Apollo's eyes, expressionless, but he did note the tiniest bit of mental wariness. Perhaps they recognized Gar'Tokk as a kindred spirit, he thought. Or a threat.

Apollo looked expectantly at the warrior he believed to be the Chitain leader. Looked, and waited. Half a centari seemed to tick past as he waited patiently, unmoved and unfrightened by the other's silence. Though Gar'Tokk stood calmly at his side, Apollo could sense Boomer and Starbuck moving restlessly behind him. He didn't know if Starbuck was completely aware of the gravity of their situation, and he didn't want to take any chances. Apollo turned, hoping the Chitain leader did not take offense

at the motion, and glared at Starbuck for a micron, silently communicating without any need for telepathy exactly how important his friend's silence was at that moment.

There were four of them, and thousands of Chitain warriors—warriors whose weapons showed how much they relished killing.

When Apollo returned his attention to the Chitain leader, squinting again, he saw that a new warrior had taken up position beside the leader. The armored chest of this new arrival had a greenish tint to it, and though there were only three jagged lines carved into that shell, there were also several more creative designs.

"Welcome, Commander Apollo," the new arrival said. "I am called Tcharken in your language. I am interpreter and advisor to Lord Schikik. It is I who have been communicating with your President, Cain." Apollo did not bother to correct Tcharken's assumption that Cain was his superior. Not yet, at least.

"On behalf of the Chitain, Commander, I welcome you to our homeworld. It is our fervent desire that an accord be reached between our two races that would forge an alliance we may all enjoy for generations to come."

"Such is our wish as well," Apollo said, in loud, firm voice, his eyes moving from the advisor to the lord of the Chitain himself. For his part, Lord Schikik merely nodded at Apollo, the near featureless face of the alien moving slightly between its shoulders. Schikik scrutinized him closely, and Apollo grew uncomfortable. After a moment, he held out his hand. When the Chitain ruler did not take it immediately, Apollo looked at Tcharken.

"For my people, upon meeting, it is customary to clasp hands as a gesture of good will and respect," he explained.

When Tcharken began to translate, Apollo winced. The native Chitain tongue was like nothing he had ever heard. Less the sound of insects he had expected than the screech of metal against metal, the loud, chilling rasp of sandpaper, yet somehow even worse.

In response, Lord Schikik slithered slightly from side to side, rising even taller on the serpentine trunk of his body, to an even greater height from which he might look down upon Apollo.

Apollo did not respond. Did not even stand any more erect than he had been. That was not the way diplomacy was played. He had been presumptuous to offer his hand, and for the Chitain leader to accept it would

be seen as a point in favor of the visitors. But not to take it would be an insult. To provide some kind of balance, the alien lord had risen up to look down on Apollo, so it might be seen that Apollo was in some way paying some form of obeisance to Lord Schikik.

If that was what was required, Apollo would not balk.

Lord Schikik extended his right upper limb, and the three thick digits slipped into Apollo's own and remained still. Even the fingers were hard and slick, almost bony. They were also edged, their sides almost as sharp as their tips obviously were. Another reminder that they were dealing with deadly creatures.

Once more Apollo bowed his head.

Lord Schikik did the same.

They released each other's hands, and Apollo looked to Tcharken once more.

"You speak Kobollian well," Apollo complimented him. "I had expected to use fundamental code for our communications."

"I have been studying since we knew of the colony on Poseidon," Tcharken replied. "And fundamental code, though less subject to interpretation, is so unwieldy a method of communication. Now, if you will, please accompany us to the…ah, yes, the Grand Palace. It is almost evening, and Lord Schikik has set our first dialogue for tomorrow morning. Though the Grand Palace is not far, I'm afraid that we have no ground transportation. We simply have no need of it. Therefore, if you have your own, you may feel free to make use of it. Otherwise, you will need to…"

Tcharken paused, and his narrow eyes narrowed even further, until they were little more than cracks in the hard surface that was his face.

"Walk?" Apollo suggested.

The eyes opened. "Yes," Tcharken said enthusiastically. "Walk!" And walk they did.

It was just under a mile from the spot where they had landed the *Starlight* to the Grand Palace of the Chitain. The sand blew hard, but fortunately the sun was already slipping along the horizon. Starbuck didn't complain any more than usual. And when they reached the Grand Palace, he was too impressed to gripe. The entire Chitain capital seemed as if it had been made of impossibly huge bones or horns thrusting from the sand. But when they finally drew close enough to recognize the detail, Starbuck came to an extraordinary conclusion. The fundamental building blocks in Chitain

architecture were…the Chitain themselves! Or, that is, their armored carapaces. Whatever had been used to shore up the walls—probably a mixture of sand and a chemical compound of some kind—the outer and inner walls were mosaics made from the dried husks of the Chitain dead. Not their flesh, of course. But whatever that outer shell was, that was what they used to build. It was almost disgusting.

It was most certainly haunting.

And it was also horribly beautiful.

They were almost constantly surrounded by Chitain warriors. The interpreter, the one who spoke Kobollian despite the fact that the thing it used as a mouth didn't seem capable of forming the syllables, stayed with them at all times.

There was a banquet almost immediately upon their arrival, and Starbuck was glad of that, at least. When they entered the banquet hall, he stopped short and stared at the glistening multi-colored walls, the way the lanterns cast shadows and ghosts around the chamber, and the sinewy movements of the Chitain who had clearly been called forth for entertainment.

Starbuck stood next to Boomer at a tall table not far from a dais under a jagged canopy where Lord Schikik had curled up on the floor to enjoy the show. It took more than a centari for Starbuck to realize that there would be no chairs. The Chitain had no need of them.

"Creepy," he said after a long period of silent observation—something very much out of character for him.

Boomer glanced at him, and Starbuck realized that Boomer, too, was not behaving normally. None of them were, except perhaps for Gar'Tokk, but who really knew what was normal for him?

"I guess even you'd have trouble getting a date in here," Boomer whispered, nodding subtly toward the dancers who glided, without any musical accompaniment—who knew if the Chitain even *had* music in their culture—across the hard stone floor.

Starbuck looked at the "dancers" again. He still couldn't tell if there was more than one gender among the Chitain. But it didn't matter.

"I'm a ladies' man, Boomer," Starbuck said quietly. "Which would restrict my dating to actual ladies. Meaning humans."

"Bigot," Boomer whispered.

Starbuck raised an eyebrow, and shook his head. “Right. And I’m sure if it weren’t for Phaedra, Major, you’d be out there doing the Chitain mating dance right now.”

“Absolutely. I find dangerous predators very sexy,” Boomer agreed. Starbuck looked at him, and all the humor was gone from the moment. The Chitain made them both nervous…even fearful. They were both well aware that the Chitain were a deadly species with superior technology. Starbuck reminded himself that this was all the more reason to behave—to do everything he could to facilitate Apollo’s diplomatic mission. They couldn’t risk a frizzort in the works here. Any error could be fatal.

A short time later, when Apollo finally took a break from his long chat with the advisor, Tcharken, he approached them across the large chamber. Many of the Chitain gathered in the room—high ranking officials and officers, Starbuck guessed—were watching him carefully. Also, Starbuck noted, there were several Chitain warriors, probably guards of some kind, who seemed to have their constant attention on Gar’Tokk. They were like shadows to the Noman, who was himself a shadow to Apollo.

When Apollo came up to stand next to them, Gar’Tokk stood just behind him, eyes flashing alertly yet inconspicuously around the room.

“How’s it going, Commander?” Boomer asked.

Apollo smiled, nodded as though he were very pleased, and said in a low voice, “Watch your backs, gentlemen. There’s something very wrong here.”

“What a surprise,” Starbuck replied, his voice almost a growl through his wide, friendly grin. “Apollo talks me into going out on some crazy mission, and now my life is in jeopardy. It’s a first.”

“Did you pick something up?” Boomer asked.

Apollo was a telepath and, at random moments, also a clairvoyant. Aside from Starbuck and Athena, Boomer was the only other person Apollo had told thus far. The three of them had been friends for a very long time, and spent enough time together that it would have been a burden to keep any real secret from him.

What Boomer apparently didn’t realize was that Apollo had used those same telepathic abilities in his death-match against Gar’Tokk. Of course the Noman knew Apollo was different. How different was another question, but Apollo seemed perfectly comfortable having the conversation in front of his new bodyguard.

“That’s the oddest thing about it,” Apollo said. “Their emotions are easy enough to sense. They radiate raw feeling like heat off the desert floor. But thoughts?”

Apollo met Starbuck’s gaze, then Boomer’s. His eyes ticked right to glance at Gar’Tokk who stood just behind him and to one side.

“I can’t read any of them,” he said at last.

Starbuck stared at him. “How can that be?”

“It’s almost like I’m being jammed somehow,” Apollo explained. “But I don’t get the impression it’s anything they’re aware of.” Boomer cleared his throat, nodded back the way Apollo had come. They all turned to see Tcharken gliding powerfully across the floor toward them.

“Let’s not be rude,” Boomer whispered.

“Oh, right,” Starbuck replied. “That’s a huge concern at the moment.”

“It had better be,” Gar’Tokk growled, “if you want to live.” They all turned, and Starbuck glanced at the back of Gar’Tokk’s head. What a strange creature, he thought. He certainly didn’t care if Starbuck or Boomer lived or died. And diplomacy had never been the strong suit of the Borellian Nomen. Yet here he was, warning Starbuck about his behavior.

It truly was fascinating. Apollo was Starbuck’s best friend, but even Starbuck had never been as completely consumed by Apollo’s well-being as Gar’Tokk’s obligation made him. Nobody ever had. In a way, it made Starbuck feel better. The only way Apollo wasn’t getting out of here alive is if Gar’Tokk died first.

And as former leader of the Borellian Nomen, Gar’Tokk would be damned hard to kill.

“The feast begins,” Tcharken announced as he slithered up. With that, a large section of the chamber’s far wall began to withdraw up into the ceiling. As it rose, it revealed the most startling thing any of them had yet seen on the Chitain homeworld.

There were covered hard shell bowls and trays—Starbuck didn’t even want to think about what might pass for food in this culture— but the real shock was the servants who were carrying them out toward the banquet table at the center of the chamber.

They were hideous. Pale brown creatures with bald, ridged heads and long arms that would have dragged on the floor if they hadn’t been carrying their burden. Stooped, pointy-eared things with leathery skin and lazy yellow eyes. They were all that, and worse.

But the thing that instantly set off every internal alarm Starbuck possessed was what had been obvious the moment he'd laid eyes on them: Two arms. Two legs. Head, shoulders, torso. Though not in the usual number, fingers and toes. These things, servants, slaves or house pets, whatever they may be…they were humanoid.

And he'd bet a yahren's pay they weren't native to this planet. Dalton's first impressions of the *Pegasus* were diverse. The ship had done a short stint as protector and leader of a fleet of refugees, but that had been yahren ago. The *Galactica* had held that role for two decades. Still, Dalton doubted that there had ever been a time when Commander Cain's ship was as much a part of a civilian culture as the *Galactica* had, by necessity, become.

No, the *Pegasus* would not have a place for non-military visitors. Civilians, even the news media, would not be welcome here. More than likely, there would not even be TransVid available aboard Cain's battlestar.

The *Galactica* was the heart of a microcosmic civilization. The *Pegasus* was a war machine. And that estimation, to Dalton's mind, included her crew. Not a buckle was undone or tarnished. There was no sign of any decoration outside of those symbols representing the ship herself, or Poseidon, the world she now represented.

Dalton hurried down a corridor aboard the *Pegasus* with Troy at her side. His presence there was electric, even though he rarely glanced at her. He kept his eyes straight ahead, in fact, and Dalton knew why. If their eyes met for more than a micron, it would be hard to look away again. Having him there, it was difficult to concentrate on the work at hand, even on the crisis that now faced them all.

She knew that they were going to have to get over that distraction, and fast, or it could end up being fatal to both of them. In the cockpit of a Viper, with the enemy bearing down on you, one tiny distraction could cost a pilot her life, or the life of a fellow Warrior. Neither price was acceptable.

So Dalton tried to focus on anything other than Troy, and the question of when they might steal some more time alone together.

Ahead of them, leading the way to the starboard launch bay, were Cain's second in command, Colonel Tacitus, and Captain Hecate, Dalton's own squadron leader. More than that, however, with Sheba missing, and Apollo, Boomer and Starbuck away from the fleet, Hecate was now the ranking remaining flight officer. Dalton knew the woman thought of herself

as just another pilot, just another Warrior, so this must have come as somewhat of a shock.

But she was handling it very well.

“Colonel, are you certain Commander Cain can afford to give up one of these new Vipers?” Hecate asked diplomatically.

“Captain, you obviously don’t know Commander Cain,” Colonel Tacitus said, his stern face rigid and emotionless. “If he wants to put a Viper Duet on board the *Galactica*, it’s because he feels that will give us the best defense position. In which case it only makes sense to train *Galactica* pilots to fly one.”

“Which is why we’re here,” Troy acknowledged. “But I’m afraid I don’t quite understand what this new Viper is. How much improvement can be made on the basic design?”

“Not a lot,” Tacitus replied. “But the Duet is something completely different.”

“Different,” Dalton said lightly. “That’s us.”

“Actually, Ensign Dalton,” Colonel Tacitus said, and paused as he glanced back at Dalton, “you and Lieutenant Troy are here because Colonel Athena and Captain Hecate both agreed that of all the pilots assigned to the *Galactica* and currently available, the two of you are best suited to a vessel in which the co-pilots must work in tandem, and so must be intimately familiar with one another.”

Dalton blinked, glanced at Troy and saw a hint of redness blooming on his cheeks.

“Since you two have known one another all your lives,” Hecate added quickly, “or at least, all of Dalton’s life, you seemed to be the only real choice.”

“Can’t wait,” Dalton replied. “A girl likes a little adventure now and again.”

Troy actually cracked a smile with that one, and Dalton was glad. She hoped that long term exposure to her more volatile personality would loosen him up some. He wasn’t as serious as his father, but most of the time it was close.

They reached the launch bay, and when they entered Dalton saw precisely what she expected to see—crisp, efficient activity. Flight crews marched about their business. A Viper shot through a launch tube only a micron after they entered. Further along she saw the starfield through a

wide launch aperture which would normally have been the exit point for shuttles and other ships too large to use a Viper tube.

When they began to walk in that direction, Dalton knew that the Viper Duet would be a large craft. She wanted to ask more questions, but the noise in the launch bay prohibited casual conversation. This was a battlestar ready for war, not one in the midst of casual flight and routine recon launches.

Up ahead, a stout man whose size and red-tinged skin marked him as a Tauran, noticed their approach and began to hurry toward them. Colonel Tacitus introduced him as Major Belarius, but Dalton paid little attention to the introductions. She was distracted by the way the man's small eyes kept darting back to her. When she was introduced to him, the man actually scowled.

"Ensign Dalton," the man repeated, as if even her name was in doubt.

"Girl, you can't be more than sixteen yahren old. You're supposed to co-pilot a Duet?"

Major Belarius turned to Colonel Tacitus, his brow furrowed, and seemed about to question his commanding officer's orders. Tacitus tilted his head slightly, eyes narrowed, and Belarius kept silent.

"Ensign Dalton is the youngest pilot ever to graduate Academy," Captain Hecate said proudly, glaring at the shorter man, though he outranked her. "I've been a Warrior fifteen yahren, and she's by far a better pilot than I am."

Dalton didn't allow herself to grin. Instead, she stared daggers at Major Belarius until the man simply turned and strode back the way he had come. Colonel Tacitus took the lead, following the Major, and they all fell in behind him.

Moments later they passed a sparklingly new shuttle, and there, on launch tracks that had been specially installed for them, were a trio of Viper Duets.

Dalton's eyes went wide. And now she did allow herself to grin. At her side, Troy said, "Wow!"

Chapter Ten

NIGHT HAD FALLEN ON THE DESERT HOMEWORLD of the Chitain.

Inside the gleaming, immaculate quarters the creatures had provided for their human visitors, Apollo shivered. Not because the quarters themselves were cold—quite the contrary. Despite the two narrow openings in the high ceiling which allowed them to see the stars and to breathe the fresh air from outside, whatever technology the Chitain used to heat these quarters was more than sufficient.

At first, they had nothing but a bed of sand to lie on, for of course, the Chitain did not have berths of any recognizably human kind. However they slept, it would be a position that was impossible for humans. In fact, Apollo suspected the sand had been loaded into the chamber for no purpose other than some measure of comfort to the humans…sand being only slightly softer and more malleable than a hard shell. On the other hand, it might well have been that the Chitain all slept in chambers filled with sand. It was obvious that they had evolved from a sand-dwelling race. Perhaps they had not entirely left the desert behind. After opening the door to their chamber to find four Chitain guards posted outside, ostensibly for their protection, but obviously more accurately to keep watch over them, Apollo had asked that he be able to retrieve a supply of valcron blankets from the *Starlight*. Instead, one of the guards had been sent to fetch the blankets.

How the creature made it to the vessel and back so quickly, and more alarmingly, how he had been able to enter their battle cruiser at all, had kept Apollo from falling asleep. His mind was occupied with those puzzles, as well as the dilemma of his not being able to delve into the secret recesses *of* the Chitain mind.

Apollo was cold. But the chill was more a psychic one than anything else. If it weren’t for Starbuck and Boomer, and even Gar’Tokk, he felt he might freeze to death in this soulless place, in a chamber with perfect climate control.

He sat up, glanced over at where Gar’Tokk stood on the inside of the chamber door, and smiled thinly, nodding at the Noman who had taken responsibility for his life. Gar’Tokk did not return the smile, but he did nod.

“So you can’t sleep either?” a low voice asked.

Apollo smiled, leaned on one elbow and looked at Starbuck, who lay in a cocoon of blankets in a little gulley he’d dug out of the sandy deck, his usually perfect hair jutting up at odd angles.

“I’ve got a lot on my mind,” Apollo replied.

“Thinking about Sheba?” Starbuck asked.

Apollo frowned. “That’s part of it,” he said.

He lied. Though Sheba’s disappearance—he refused to think of her as dead—haunted him at odd intervals, he had purposely tried to push away thoughts of Sheba and concentrate on the situation at hand. It seemed the only practical way to deal with such a tense crisis.

Now he felt guilty for it. He ought to have been dwelling on her disappearance. They were to be married after all, and without question, panic and almost obsessive melancholy would be the accepted emotions now for a man in love. And he did love her, without question. But Apollo’s responsibilities to the fleet, to the race, were greater than his responsibility to himself, or to the woman he loved. For the first time, he wondered how Sheba was going to deal with that…

If she ever had the chance to deal with it at all.

“What’s the rest?” Starbuck asked.

“All of this,” Apollo said. “Maybe I’ve come to rely too much on my… intuition. But when I can’t read a situation, it makes me nervous. Suspicious.”

“Like maybe there’s a reason you can’t read them?”

“Like that, yeah. I’m also extremely curious about those servant drones. Slaves, whatever the Chitain might call them. I think we ought to try to find out more about them.”

“I had the same thought,” Starbuck replied. “But actually, I’ve just been lying here on this ridiculous excuse for a berth, wondering about Athena, and how she’s dealing with all this feldergarb, this whole insane standoff. And Dalton. And Cassie, of course.”

“You’re jealous now that Cain’s resurfaced once again?” Apollo asked.

“Of course I am,” Starbuck replied. “But not in the way that you mean. I know that I have no claim to Cassiopeia’s affections, but I did have a child with her. I still love her in so many ways. I have no right to be jealous, but I can’t help it. Guess I’m old enough to know better, but young enough to still feel this way.”

Apollo smiled in the gloom of the starlit room. “Are you sure you’re Starbuck?”

“That’s what I was about to say,” Boomer interjected. Apollo shook his head, looked over at him. It appeared none of them were getting any rest.

“You mugjapes are just envious that I’m such a well-adjusted man,” Starbuck said with a sardonic grin. “I’m comfortable with loving more than one woman.”

“And it’s such a hardship to have two women who love you,” Boomer teased.

“This reminds me of Academy,” Apollo said quietly. Silently, his closest friends agreed. Though Apollo had been the gravest of military students, to the point where he would have been shunned by the others if not for Starbuck—and the fact that he had been Cadet Commander—during light cycle, when the other cadets were fast asleep, these three had spent centons talking about their lives, their families, their dreams for the future.

They could never have imagined the true pleasures, or the real horrors, that their future would hold.

“In the spirit of those golden days,” Boomer said, with a sly grin, “I suppose I owe you boys the secret I’ve been keeping.” Apollo stared at him. For the moment Boomer mentioned the word

“secret” his mind had just skimmed the surface of his friend’s mind. Not any real thievery, but the merest touch had unearthed this thing that was now foremost in Boomer’s mind.

“What?” Starbuck asked.

“Congratulations,” Apollo said. “But if I’d known, I would never have allowed you to join us on this mission.”

Starbuck frowned, glared at Apollo, then at Boomer. “What?” he demanded.

“Apollo, you needed a fourth for this trip. I wouldn’t have trusted anybody else to keep you and Starbuck out of trouble,” Boomer replied.

“What?” Starbuck snapped angrily.

Apollo smiled, happy for his friend despite his concern. Boomer also smiled, looked at Starbuck, and said, “Phaedra’s pregnant.” Starbuck’s response was predictable glee. After Boomer’s revelation, it took them quite some time to settle down again. Eventually, Apollo could sense from their breathing and the tranquility of their minds that his friends were asleep.

But Apollo still could not sleep. For a time he did wonder about Sheba, and the pain in his heart was enough that once again he forced such thoughts away. Instead, he wondered about the humanoid servants, and began to examine several ideas about how he might have a conversation with one of them. If conversation were possible.

If not, he would try to enter their minds. Their masters were unreadable, but the same was not likely to be true for the slaves. After a while, he rose and walked to where Gar'Tokk stood guard at the door. The Noman did not look tired, but Apollo knew that he must be.

"Why don't you let me stand for a while, until I am tired enough to sleep?" Apollo suggested, and when Gar'Tokk was about to balk, he held up one hand. "If you are exhausted come morning, you'll be more a liability than any real help to me."

Gar'Tokk nodded, and turned to walk to the valcron nest that had been prepared for him in the sand. After several steps, he turned to regard Apollo.

"You worry for your mate, Major Sheba?" Gar'Tokk asked. Somehow, the question from this supposedly heartless warrior struck more deeply than it had from Starbuck. He searched himself for the truth, then, for a more honest answer.

"No," he said at last, pain straining the worry lines around his eyes. "I grieve for her."

Gar'Tokk nodded. "I understand."

Apollo's eyes widened as the Noman went to lay among his blankets to get some rest. The commander of the *Galactica* stood that way for a long time. Many centari later, he realized something that had never occurred to him with any real significance before. The Nomen were so foreign to the rest of the fleet, and had seemed so loveless, that it had never seemed important. Still, there it was:

There were no female Nomen on the Colonial fleet.

Soon, their race would be extinct.

"You really shouldn't be doing this without the Council's approval," Cassiopeia said, eyes narrowing as she momentarily blocked Cain's passage down the corridor.

"I haven't asked them," Cain replied. "Therefore, I am not doing anything against their will. If I had asked them, I would have risked their disapproval.

“Besides, you and Commander Apollo both made it a point to tell me that he was free to wander the fleet, thanks to the TraceBomb in his system,” Cain said, eyebrows raised. “That tells me he’s also free to speak with whomever he wishes.”

He leaned forward and kissed Cassie on the forehead. She sighed, stood aside, and then followed him to the door that was his target. Cain rapped his knuckles on the door—such an old-fashioned gesture that Cassiopeia couldn’t help but be charmed by it, and him, all over again. A moment later, the door slid aside. Inside, the chamber was dimly lit. At its center, Baltar sat on a chaise, sipping something from a fluted tankard, clothed all in white.

“Ah, Commander Cain…oh, excuse me, it’s President Cain now, isn’t it?” Baltar said, his smile as gleefully insincere as ever. “Come in, Sire, I’ve been expecting you.”

“How could you have been expecting him, Baltar?” Cassie asked.

“Ah, and the lovely Cassiopeia. Always a pleasure to share the gift of your presence, my dear,” Baltar leered. “We’re in a bit of a bind out there now, aren’t we?”

Cain bristled. “I see you keep up on current events, you traitorous daggit.”

“One must remain aware of the winds of change, Cain,” Baltar replied.

“Particularly when the Council has the ability to blow one up from a great distance.”

Cassiopeia saw the real Baltar then. It disturbed her deeply. For here there was no pretense, no effort to pretend that he was a victim of outside forces. Here the Great Traitor was proud of his efforts, proud of what they had wrought.

But why? He had worked so hard to forge a new image of himself. Why let the mask fall now?

“Frankly, I’m surprised you weren’t executed immediately,” Cain said, a small smile creeping over his features. “That’s what I would have done.” Baltar leaned forward on the chaise, lowered his chin almost to his chest. His eyes were heavily lidded now as he shot a dangerous look at Cain. Cassiopeia felt a chill run up her spine.

“Well, then, it’s a good thing that you aren’t in charge around here, isn’t it?” Baltar sneered.

Then the violent look disappeared from his features. Baltar stood, smiled, the perfect host. “Why don’t you both sit down? May I get you something? A glass of ambrosa perhaps?”

“How do you come to have ambrosa?” Cassiopeia asked, her anger tempered only by her secret fear of the man. “Most of the fleet’s citizens can only afford it on special occasions. You have no cubits, and no possessions beyond what the Quorum has provided for you.” Baltar smiled. “There are those who don’t see me as the monster you make me out to be, my dear. These friends have provided for me as best they can.

“Now, would you like a glass, or would you prefer something less…

luxurious?”

“I’ll pass, thank you,” Cassie said, fuming.

“Cain?”

“Please,” Cain replied, and Cassiopeia shot him a hard look which he either did not see, or chose to ignore.

After Baltar had served Cain’s ambrosa, and they were all seated in the gloom of the chamber, Baltar focused his gaze upon Cain once more.

“I suppose it is fortunate for me that you aren’t in command here,” Baltar said. “On the other hand, I wonder if our friend Tigh, or that abominably rude son of Adama’s, have begun to grow curious as to how government is going to work once your little kingdom is finally settled. Something tells me they have no plans to pay obeisance to your wisdom and leadership.

“And only an idiot would think you would take your instructions from a retired infantryman or a man half your age who is even more of a dreamer than his father was.”

Cain paused, raised an eyebrow, and then lifted his glass of ambrosa in a toast.

“To your long-awaited demise, you insufferable skreeter,” Cain said amiably.

As the white-haired old commander sipped at his ambrosa, Cassiopeia glanced from one man to the other. She hadn’t put much thought into the questions Baltar had raised, but now they seemed particularly important. She supposed it would be something resolved diplomatically among the Quorum that ruled the fleet, and the one which governed Poseidon. But technically, if the fleet settled on Poseidon, the Council members would have no more power than any other colonist.

And what of Apollo? Yes, Cassiopeia could see Baltar's point. If the Chitain hadn't gotten in the way of the fleet's merging with the Poseidon colony, the power struggle would already have begun in earnest. As it was, it had only been postponed.

"So, to what do I owe the pleasure?" Baltar asked at last. Cain nodded, and Cassiopeia was glad they had finally gotten past the politics, and around to the point.

"I've seen flatscreen transcripts of your conversations with Quorum representatives regarding your time with the Cylons, your knowledge of Cylon tactics, weaponry, and history," Cain told him. "To be honest, very little of it was news to me. Not necessarily that I had known these things, but at least surmised them.

"What I want to know is this: the last time I faced the Cylons was ten yahren ago. At that time, they were still using mechanoid drones, which were almost entirely cybernetic. While younger or less educated Warriors might not recall it, the use of those drones had only become commonplace several decades before…"

Cain faltered. His inquisitive eyes grew cold.

"Before you helped them destroy everything that humanity had strived for millennia to build."

"Actually," Baltar said, "from all appearances, humanity is a far more durable, resilient race now than they were eighteen yahren ago."

"So—what?" Cassie snapped. "You did us a favor?"

" *Your* words, Cassiopeia," Baltar said happily. "Though I won't argue them." Then he turned his attention to Cain once more. "You want to know why the drones have fallen out of use? What kind of forces and percentages the Cylons can muster, and if the drones are still being deployed elsewhere?"

"That's it! precisely."

"Fine," Baltar agreed. "But first, I'd like to hear, in your estimation—or, more accurately, the fleet's estimation, what the relationship is between the Cylons and Count Iblis. President Tigh would not tell me. And the information I received from other sources seemed… imprecise." Cain looked at Cassiopeia. She was loathe to discuss something with Baltar that President Tigh had already decided not to tell him. On the other hand, she didn't see any harm in the knowledge, which was something he might have

acquired from many other sources. And she had never been asked not to discuss it.

So she told him. She explained to the Great Traitor that Count Iblis had first existed as a human being thousands of yahren earlier. His lineage had split from the House of Kobol, after which the House of Iblis was so shunned that he abandoned humanity altogether. Iblis had found the planet Cylon, whose reptilian native race was sentient, but undeveloped, and he had set out, with a combination of human genetic splicing and cybernetic technology, to create a new race of aliens that would have two goals as a species—the conquest of the universe and the extermination of humanity.

"But how is it possible for him to still exist, millennia later?" Baltar asked.

"That is a question better suited for a religious acolyte, or pondered while reading the Books of the Lords of Kobol," Cain said, before Cassie had a chance to respond. "The important thing is that he does exist, and on a level that is far above mere humanity."

"It's interesting to hear your version of events," Baltar said cryptically.

"And?" Cassiopeia urged.

"So impatient," Baltar said. "Very well. I never had occasion to visit the home planet, Cylon. I doubt I would have enjoyed it very much. That is where both Centurions and Cogitators are manufactured, and that is where an Imperious Leader is always kept in preparation should the reigning leader die or be destroyed. I was never able to determine any real difference from one to the next, and therefore, I don't know exactly how many Imperious Leaders I served while I was…a prisoner of the Cylons." Neither Cassie nor Cain chose to challenge Baltar's version of events.

"I can only surmise that before Count Iblis died, he did prepare an Imperious Leader, a creature with all of his wisdom and knowledge, to carry on in his place. Where he went then…only he knows. Out into the universe somewhere, I imagine. I gather that he was believed to have been gone forever. Death was an issue the Cylons hadn't considered, apparently. But to the cogitators, the only Cylons with whom one could have an actual conversation, Iblis was widely considered a myth.

"When I was to be executed, just before Starbuck and Apollo rescued me, it was Iblis who offered me enough information to save my life. The Cylons, of course, would not have been pleased. It seemed to me that he

and they were somehow at odds. The child raging against its creator, perhaps.

“Still, in all the yahren after Iblis had disappeared, the Cylons continued to evolve along the path he had set for them. When the war with humanity heated up, and their breeding program could not keep up with their need for Centurions, the Cylons began to experiment with cloning. Cloning only a part of the Cylon, namely, a portion of brain—to which was added cybernetic enhancements.”

“Drones,” Cassiopeia said, and thought of the Cylon drone that Plutarch had built based upon the Cylon records.

“Indeed,” Baltar agreed. “But after their…initial victory over humanity, and as we…as they began to lose track of the fleet, the genetic breeding program finally began to catch up with the demand for Centurions throughout the Cylon-controlled galactic sectors. The production of new drones was slowed dramatically, almost ceased, from what I know of it. I’d be surprised if they were even making new drones now.”

“Which means that most, if not all, of the Cylons we will face when next we clash with them will be actual flesh and blood beneath all that armor and circuitry?” Cain asked, eyes narrowing as he leaned forward.

“It stands to reason,” Baltar replied, tilting his head slightly to regard Cain curiously.

“What I want to know, Baltar, is this,” Cain said, lifting his chin slightly to look down at the Great Traitor. “The Centurions. With the cybernetics and all of that feldergarb…can they feel pain?”

“Of course they can,” Baltar replied, and frowned at the incongruity of the question.

Cain’s smile was broad and cruel.

“That’s all I wanted to know.”

Athena was astonished by her nephew’s words. “Troy,” she said, “why don’t we put off this conversation and concentrate on the enemy at hand. The Chitain are a fearsome race.”

She watched Troy’s face, and the way his eyes narrowed as she spoke. Most people wouldn’t recognize it as a sign of annoyance, but she did. It was a family trait, an expression Troy had picked up from his father, even though Apollo was not his biological parent.

It never ceased to amaze her how similar the two men were, father and son. And yet, Troy had his own agenda, his own priorities. One of which

was defining his position in a society in which he was, for all intents and purposes, the pampered prince. He hated it, when he allowed himself to recognize it as the truth.

"It's just been haunting me," Troy said, and the pain in his voice was undisguised.

Athena sighed, ran a brush through her long hair as she sat in her quarters and stared at Troy's image on the flatscreen in front of her. It was a private frequency, but that didn't mean it couldn't be hacked from the outside. Still, it was clear from his tone and his questions that he needed her input. She could not abandon him. Athena had come to the sad conclusion that it was unlikely she would ever allow herself time *to* have children. Troy was the closest she had ever come.

"You have to make your own decisions, Troy," she told him. "How it may affect the ones you love is certainly something to consider, but it is part of life that not all of our paths may lead in the same direction. You know what your grandfather used to say."

Troy smiled at her mention of Adama. Athena wished he were there at that moment. Her father had been the wisest man she had ever known.

"Yes," Troy replied. "'Let the astral winds blow where they may.' But he believed in providence, Athena. Grandfather had faith in the Lords of Kobol, and their plan for the future of humanity. I don't think I do."

"Your father does."

"I know. But that's what this is all about, isn't it? It's all well and good to have a vision for the future of humanity. To look toward a time centuries from now, and the home that might one day be ours. But who's going to guarantee that the Cylons won't come along and ruin all of that? That we won't simply be leading them to destroy whatever other branches of humanity we may find out in the universe?"

Troy paused, glanced down as if ashamed, then looked back up at the screen.

"I know you'll go with him," Troy said. "No matter what you say, I know you and Starbuck and Boomer and the others…I know you'll go because you have to."

Athena didn't respond because she wasn't certain Troy was correct.

"And at first I was fully convinced that my duty lay with my father's vision. But I don't anymore," Troy said emphatically. "Someone's got to

take a stand. Someone's got to destroy the Cylons once and for all, or we'll never know peace."

Athena took a deep breath. The mere idea of Troy staying behind while Apollo went on…she knew that it would kill her brother to let destiny decide if he would ever see his son again.

"It's…it isn't a question we even need to ask right now," Athena reminded him.

"It's a question I need to ask," Troy said.

"What about Dalton?"

"I haven't talked to her about it," Troy replied. "I honestly don't know what she'd do. But being a Warrior is all she knows. She may well decide to stay."

Athena stared at him. Though Troy was on the *Pegasus*, and she on the *Galactica*, they shared an intimacy not defined by physical proximity.

"Are you sure this isn't just because you really don't want to leave the Cylons behind?" she asked, and the words were some of the hardest she had ever had to speak. "Your father and mother were taken from you, Boxey. Last yahren when we finally were forced into conflict with the Cylons again, you were almost happy. Maybe this is your own need for vengeance; maybe you just want to kill more Cylons."

"Maybe I do," he agreed. "And don't call me Boxey." The Viper Duet was an extraordinary fighter craft. It appeared incredibly ungainly sitting on its launch track, but it was obvious just looking at it that in space it would be a potent weapon indeed. Cain's engineers were brilliant.

From outside, the Viper Duet looked like nothing so much as a pair of larger, beautiful new Vipers attached at the belly. Between these two ships was a long flat weapons module that could be fired both forward and aft, and also had a tertiary fuel supply. Tertiary, because the Duet could conserve fuel over long journeys by using only one of the Vipers' pulsars for propulsion, and then the next.

In a Duet, a pilot could travel farther, but what's more, it was possible for the dual pilots to either share weapons and navigation, or separate them, allowing one pilot to completely control weapons systems…

including rear turbolasers that single Vipers didn't have. In the tightest of situations, a Viper Duet could change the entire landscape of a space battle.

Dalton should have been enjoying it. But she wasn't.

The Duet sat on its launch track, for all intents and purposes on its side. Both pilots' seats were on gimbals, so even though both cockpits were on their sides, the seats themselves remained upright. Once the Duet launched and the ship's internal gravity kicked in, the gimbals would lock into place.

"I wouldn't spend too much time playing up there, *Ensign*," Major Belarius said. "Your scores in the Duet flight sim weren't *that* good, and I won't risk my pilots' lives on some girl who should still be in Academy learning what it means to be a Warrior."

Dalton froze.

Belarius had been at it all day. Throughout their training in the flight sim, he'd taken any opportunity to antagonize her, to distract her and generally disparage her abilities as a pilot and a Warrior.

"Ignore him, Dalton."

Troy's voice was a low whisper on the Duet's internal comm system. He was on the other side of the ship. She couldn't see his face, and she wanted to right then. Needed to. **Still,** he could hear what transpired, and that was something. Both of their canopies were popped, and they sat in the gimbal-seats just examining the Duet for real, close up. A flight sim was one thing. A real ship had its own personality. Its own soul. Dalton could always connect with a starfighter on that basis, and in this, that went even further. It was almost as though it were meant for her and Troy. It was intimate.

Or it would have been if not for the buffoon who would simply *not* lay off. She didn't know if it was because she was female, or because she was only eighteen, or because Starbuck was her father and a legend, or because she wasn't one of Belarius's own pilots.

But she didn't care.

"If you were dissatisfied with my scores in flight sim, Major, you should feel free to report that to Commander Cain. Maybe he'll assign another pilot, or another pilot team, for the Duet he plans to give to the *Galactica*

," she said, all sweetness and light.

Polite. As respectful as the mugjape's rank demanded.

That is, if you weren't paying attention. If you were, her tone told another story.

"I may just do that, Ensign. Don't push me. As far as I'm concerned, you haven't done anything worthy of arrogance yet," Major Belarius said.

"Major, I really don't think…" Troy began.

Dalton cut him off. Troy was a formidable Warrior, and probably a better pilot than she was at the end of the day because he didn't take the stupid risks that she did. But she'd be damned if she'd ever let anyone fight her battles for her.

"I'll make you a deal, Major," Dalton said into her main commlink, turning around to stare out through the open canopy at the man down on the launch deck.

"What the frack are you talking about?" Belarius asked.

"You and me, Viper to Viper, turbolasers on full beam," Dalton said through clenched teeth, speaking softly into the comm inside her helm.

"Or, if you don't have the pogees for it, pick one of your little boys from the *Pegasus*. Open space. Winner lives."

She took off her helm and set it on the seat. Dalton dropped from the open canopy to the launch deck and landed in a crouch. She wasn't about to fall to her knees in front of this man—who even now was staring at her in rage and astonishment.

"Winner lives," she repeated. "Loser dies."

"You've got a big mouth on you for such a little girl," Belarius growled.

"I could write you up for insubordination, or I could pull you off Duet training right now."

Belarius was short, not much taller than Dalton, but he was a brawny man who could have crushed her to vapors. If she were willing to let him. Dalton was a petite creature, slender and as wispy as her blonde hair. But her muscles were taut, and her eyes were cold steel.

She leaned in and stared Belarius down.

"Yeah," she agreed. "You could do either one of those things. But if you did, I'd have to spread it around that I challenged you and you backed down. Word gets out that you've got no pogees, even your own pilots won't be able to look you in the eye.

"After all, Major, I'm just a *little girl*." Belarius glared at her, his nostrils flaring. His red Tauran complexion grew even darker. After a moment, Dalton let a little snuffle of a laugh escape her lips and she smiled slightly.

"Thought so," she whispered.

"Little girl," Belarius said dangerously, "maybe you need a little lesson in respect. A lesson in how to treat a Warrior."

The Major moved in, thick arms bulging as he reached out and grabbed Dalton by the biceps and pulled her against him. Quickly, he reached one arm behind her back and the other moved lower.

For half a moment, Dalton was furious. Then she was just disgusted. She drove her stiffened fingers into a pressure point where Belarius's arm joined his shoulder and the Major let go, eyes bright with the momentary pain.

"Nobody has more respect for a true Warrior than I do, you stumpy little fool," she sneered. "And I don't know what kind of Academy you went through, but I'll bet it wasn't under Commander Cain. Something tells me you wouldn't pass muster in the current regime. On the *Galactica*, you'd be cleaning toilets."

She spun on one heel and began walking back toward the Duet. Even as she approached, Troy dropped down from his side of the ship and started toward her.

"Dalton, what's going on?" he asked.

"Nothing important," she replied. "Let's head back to the flight sim."

"That's right, little girl," Belarius snarled from behind her. "You just skate along on your father's reputation. From what I hear, he's all talk, just like you are."

Dalton stopped. Looked down. Breathed through her nose.

"But a reputation goes a long way," Belarius continued. "From the looks of things, it's probably what got you through Academy." Dalton turned, started back toward the Major. He was smiling now.

"Who's going to tell the daughter of the legendary Starbuck that she's even worse in the cockpit of a Viper than her mindwipe daddy? His maverick attitude probably got a lot of Warriors killed. I'm sure yours will too."

She closed in on that smile. Belarius was ready for her. This was what he wanted, of course. Trouble. Enough trouble to blacken her service record forever.

He had no idea.

Dalton swung at him. Belarius blocked her blow, reached for her neck. But her first swing had been a feint, just enough to get him to commit himself, his arms up and reaching for her.

Her left fist slammed into the Major's solid stomach muscles with enough force to knock the wind out of him. Dalton was stronger than she

looked.

Troy shouted, “Dalton, no!”

But it was too late. As Belarius bent forward slightly with the force of her blow, Dalton moved in, tripped him up, sent him tumbling backward. She rode him all the way down. The Major tried to defend himself, and he was strong, no question.

But Dalton was too fast.

She held him by the scruff of his hair, and she hit him. The first blow shattered his nose, a spray of blood showering her knuckles. And she kept hitting him, again and again until he stopped struggling beneath her and his neck went limp and his eyes were bleary and unfocused. Even after that, Dalton would have kept hitting Major Belarius, but by then, despite her efforts to swat him away, Troy had managed to pull her off of her superior officer.

Troy spun her around and shouted at her, screamed in her face, but Dalton barely heard him.

“What the frack were you thinking?” Troy roared. “What have you done?”

Dalton smiled thinly. “He had it coming,” she said. “He attacked me.”

“Yeah, and you forced him to back off and then walked away…and then you went back! That isn’t self-defense, Dalton!” Troy whispered harshly, glancing around to see if anybody had actually witnessed what had happened on the launch deck.

But nobody had. They were at the far end of the bay and there were no shuttles launching now. The only flight crews were working with the main Viper launch tubes, and not in any position to have seen Dalton give the mugjape his due.

“So if I hadn’t walked away first, if I’d beaten him bloody when he put his hands on me, that would have been all right? That would have been self defense?” she asked. “But since I tried to stay calm, since I tried to fight what you call my short fuse, and then I lost it…now you’re not going to back me up?”

“Of course I’ll back you up,” Troy said immediately, staring at her angrily.

“Then what’s the problem?” Dalton demanded.

But Troy didn’t have an answer for that.

Unsmiling, Dalton kissed him.

Then she turned and walked to the comm unit on the wall and asked to speak to Colonel Tacitus. Looked like Cain was going to have to find someone else to oversee her and Troy's training on the Duet; Belarius wasn't going to be doing much of anything for a while.

After she reported what had happened, Dalton turned to Troy and let him see what was really inside her. She never let anyone else see that, not really. But Troy was different.

"I could handle his ridicule," she said. "I could handle him pawing me. But he went too far, Troy. First he insulted my father. Then he said I only made it through Academy *because* of Starbuck, You must know that anger, Troy. Commander Apollo is your father. You know what I mean." Troy nodded.

"I'm a Warrior, Troy," Dalton said at length. "Nobody is ever going to take that away from me."

Chapter Eleven

LIEUTENANT JOLLY AND CAPTAIN HECATE stepped out of the interfleet shuttle and onto the launch deck of the *Academia*. Their companionship was amiable, but tentative. Though they had served together for many yahren, they had never been close. Hecate led Red Squadron, and Jolly had been in Blue Squadron for the duration of his service. The different groups of Viper pilots had always had a healthy rivalry, not enough to interfere with the job, but enough that the pilots primarily spent time with the members of their own squadron. As a Warrior and a pilot, however, Jolly had nothing but respect for Captain Hecate. The thin, attractive woman was pleasant enough, but she always carried herself with a distinctly military bearing. She was perfect officer material, which was probably why, though she was fully eleven yahren Jolly's junior, Hecate had made captain, and Jolly wasn't likely to ever achieve that rank.

This was all right with him. He was a Warrior, not an officer. He was content to follow, unless he was forced to lead. In this case, however, with half of Blue Squadron missing or away from the fleet, Hecate was the ranking pilot on the *Galactica*, and therefore in temporary command of both Blue and Red Squadrons.

But at the moment there was a shortage of pilots; in fact, for the first time in recent memory, they had more Vipers than available Warriors to fly them. Certainly there were several retirees that could be called in if necessary. But with one or two exceptions, they'd be better off with Academy-trained hotshots than pilots past their prime. Jolly knew that, but it was difficult for him to accept.

Shortly, he and Hecate turned down the corridor that led to the cadet quarters.

"We have plenty of Warriors who know how to fly a Viper," Jolly said, his voice low. "I'm not sure I'm comfortable putting cadets at risk. There are a number of infantry-ranked Warriors we could call upon." Hecate looked at him, her eyes sad. "Against the Chitain, Jolly, we'll need speed more than anything else. Speed and cleverness and pilots willing to risk it all. Those are traits of youth. And, after all, even if some of these cadets have never flown out of the flight sim, at least they're more up to date in

their training, and fresher at it than infantry Warriors or battlestar crewmen who haven't been inside a Viper or a flight sim since the sun still rose over Caprica."

Jolly nodded, resigned to the truth of her words. A moment later, they arrived at the entrance to the cadet quarters. The wide circular door irised open, and there was shouting immediately, as the cadets noticed their presence. The would-be Warriors and pilots hustled to make themselves presentable and then stood at attention, waiting to be inspected.

"At ease," Captain Hecate said immediately.

Jolly could feel as well as hear the collective exhalation in the cramped quarters. He glanced toward the back of the enormous chamber but still couldn't see all of the cadets. He hoped Hecate's voice would carry. As if she'd read his mind, when the captain spoke again, it was in a much louder voice.

"Cadets, as you know, the fleet is currently facing dire circumstances. The alien armada that surrounds us has made no offensive move as of yet, but we have no reason to believe they are friendly. No reason to yet believe that the diplomatic mission undertaken by Commander Apollo will succeed.

"The Chitain have vastly superior starfighters. We are doing all we can to prepare a counteroffensive or, perhaps, even a first strike." At the words "first strike," even the sounds of cadets breathing ceased for a moment.

"As we speak," Hecate continued, "engineers and flight techs are working to install Quantum Shift Effect generators in as many of the fleet's unarmed vessels as possible. Of course, Vipers are also being outfitted with QSE tech, but few will be ready if we have to attack quickly.

"With the absence of so many of our pilots, Colonel Athena has asked that Lieutenant Jolly and I move some of you temporarily to active duty," Hecate said, and then paused to allow the swell of emotion and the hushed whispers of excitement to die down.

"Jolly," Hecate said, and then deferred to him.

"Nice to see you all again," he said, for he had probably taught them all at one time or another. He was a frequent substitute or visiting lecturer at Academy. In some ways, that made his task simpler, and in some ways, it made the task harder.

"Captain Hecate and I have gone over the progress reports from all of your proctors, particularly the results of the CSC analyses," Jolly announced.

There was quiet again, as he had expected. None of them had realized that the cadet squad commanders for the following term had already been chosen. For second-year cadets, that wasn't an issue. But for first-year students, the suspense must have been extraordinary. Jolly smiled to himself as he recalled his own time at Academy. There had been no suspense then. Not one of the cadets had ever doubted that their own squad commander would be Apollo. In a way, Jolly thought, things hadn't changed very much at all.

"For the moment, we are going to take three pilots up to temporary active status. CSC Cato and CSC Marcellus, please gather your things immediately after this assembly and accompany Captain Hecate and myself back to the *Galactica*."

Jolly paused as there were congratulations all around.

"Lieutenant?" someone called. "What about the third pilot?" Jolly smiled. "The third pilot will be Cadet Freyja," he said. The uproar was predictable. Freyja was, after all, a first-year cadet. He watched the girl's face. At first, she smiled, but then her eyes dropped and she seemed to cringe at the anger and envy of those around her. Jolly was about to say something, to censure the other cadets.

Hecate beat him to it.

"Enough!" the Captain snapped. "Cadet Freyja isn't the best pilot who has ever come through Academy, but her scores are higher than any other current cadet. Majors Sheba and Boomer had already determined that she would be a CSC next term. Now, at least for the moment, she's an Ensign. You will give her the respect she deserves, as you would any other Warrior."

An arm was raised far back in the chamber.

"Cadet Byron, isn't it?" Jolly asked. "What is it, Byron?"

"I just wanted to say, we're here when you need us, Lieutenant," Cadet Byron said. "Those skreeters are up to something out there, and I don't care how advanced their tech is, or how fast their ships are. Maybe they think they're something, but they haven't gone up against the Battlestar *Galactica* before."

The cadet quarters erupted into an explosion of cheers. Moments later, Cato, Marcellus and Freyja had gathered their things and were accompanying Jolly and Hecate back to the shuttle that would take them to their new quarters on the *Galactica*.

“They have such faith,” Hecate said in a low voice, out of range of the cadets’ hearing.

“It isn’t faith, Captain,” Jolly replied. “It’s arrogance. They’re young, they don’t know any better.”

“Whatever it is, I wish they could spare a little for the rest of us,” Hecate said.

Lucifer was pleased. The Imperious Leader apparently knew where the human fleet was, but he had not deigned to share that information with his chief advisor. But with the new information that Lucifer had just received, a report that he had been awaiting ever since they departed from Cylon, the cogitator had acquired that piece of information. He did not know how it had come to be, nor how the Imperious Leader had known of it. But, to Lucifer’s immense pleasure, the human fleet had been sighted, and was even now being monitored by Cylon outriders. Perhaps, Lucifer thought, he would get to see Baltar again. Perhaps, he thought with great relish, he would finally have the Imperious Leader’s blessing on his desire to kill the arrogant human he had been made to serve for so long.

Still, Lucifer could not put aside the question that lingered strongly in his mind: How? How had the Imperious Leader known of the fleet’s location? Or had he known at all? Perhaps it had been a ruse to perpetuate the image of his omnipotence.

Many questions. But Lucifer was comforted by the fact that now, at least, he had some of the answers.

He reached the Imperious Leader’s chamber and the door opened for him, as usual. Within, all was darkness, and even his cybernetic eyes were barely able to make out the shape of the Leader above, on his High Seat. Lucifer’s entrance had been all but silent, and the Imperious Leader appeared not to have noticed his presence, despite the sparks that leaped and crackled with the dome of the cogitator’s skull. Lucifer stopped and stared at his master, and at the swirling, oily black maelstrom that seemed to be floating in the air in the center of the chamber, just in front of the Imperious Leader’s face.

“…will soon be at an end,” the Leader was saying, his deep voice echoing in the chamber. “Our enemies have fled as far into the heart of the galaxy as we will allow. Soon, you will have what you have always dreamed of…”

Lucifer had no idea what the words meant, but the Imperious Leader seemed to be speaking them to the boiling black mass. So entranced was he by that churning darkness that the cogitator barely noticed his master had ceased to speak and was now staring down at him. Not until the living darkness had disappeared did Lucifer look up into the face of his master.

“You have word of the new outpost?” the Imperious Leader asked.

“They will not be completed with construction for some time,” Lucifer replied, expecting his master’s displeasure, “but they will be prepared for your inspection by the time we arrive.”

The Imperious Leader’s reptilian smile was chilling even to the calculating soul of his advisor. Lucifer began to turn away, paused, and then thought better of questioning his master. He moved to the door.

“Lucifer,” the Imperious Leader said quietly.

“Yes, my master?”

“A lesson,” the Leader said. “Centurions are mindless. Cogitators were given minds as a gift. But some things, it is better not to know.”

“What do you mean the Chitain won’t allow you to speak with Apollo?” Athena demanded, staring at Commander Cain in consternation. They stood on the metal gangway that led from the ascensior to the bridge. For the moment, they were alone, which was all the better. Athena tried to calm herself down to avoid going to war against an enemy she didn’t think the fleet could defeat.

“I spoke with Tcharken a short time ago. He passed along good wishes from Lord Schikik and said that all was going well. But when I asked him if I could speak with Commander Apollo, I was told that he and the other members of the embassy were resting in their quarters and Chitain custom required that they not be disturbed, as they have an audience with Lord Schikik tomorrow.”

“Not to be disturbed?” Athena said wonderingly. “And you said…?”

“I told Tcharken we would expect to hear from Commander Apollo as soon as the sun rose over the Chitain capital,” Cain said, the anger and impatience in his voice quite clear.

But something was clear to Athena as well. Something she had never expected. The Cain she knew would not have stood for Tcharken’s obfuscation. The Cain she knew would have insisted upon speaking with Apollo, would have damned the entire Chitain race and told Tcharken that

his mother's eggs were rotten, or some such, without a moment's hesitation or regard for the demands of diplomacy.

Indeed, there was only one thing that Athena thought could have turned Cain into a diplomat: fear. Commander Cain, the President of Poseidon, who had faced impossible odds and been given up for dead, only to emerge once more unscathed time and again…was afraid.

"So what now?" Athena asked, truly at a loss. She hadn't anticipated the Chitain being so difficult.

After all, the fleet was surrounded. The orbital shipyard around Poseidon was also being targeted. At a glance, it would seem that the Chitain were in complete control of the situation. If they wanted to attack, to simply destroy the fleet, they would have done so already. Or, at least, tried to do so. If they had already killed Apollo…but no, Athena would have known if her brother had died.

In her mind, she would have heard him.

Or would she? After all, she had reached out with her mind, trying to find her brother on the surface of Xerik-7, and found nothing. Granted, her mental powers had not been developed yet to the extent that Apollo's had, but she ought to have been able to find him—to sense the open channel of his sensitive mind.

But there was nothing, only a weird kind of static emanating from the planet that gave her a bit of a headache.

"Well, have you tried to contact Apollo through the usual commlink?" Cain asked condescendingly.

"Of course I have," Athena snapped. "Whatever equipment they had must have been taken or left aboard the *Starlight*. Perhaps they thought they would return to the ship, and haven't been able to do so." So the Chitain wouldn't allow them contact, their equipment had been kept from them somehow, and Athena couldn't connect with her brother through their Kobollian telepathy.

"We'll continue our preparations for the worst," Cain said, "and hope that we hear from Apollo in the next few centons."

"How did we get into this?" Athena wondered aloud, turning her back on the man for a moment. "Cain, you spent so much effort trying to keep us from discovering this situation; what had you planned to do before we came along?"

“Before you came along,” Cain said coldly, “the Chitain were content to linger ominously in orbit and discuss a peace process that never seemed to happen. I think the arrival of your fleet somehow set them off.”

“I just wish I knew what they wanted with us,” Athena grumbled. “It isn’t as if they need peace, and it’s obvious they’re a warrior race. Why haven’t they attacked?”

Cain did not respond.

Athena thought for a moment, then realized that she was more angry than afraid. And if Cain wasn’t going to do anything…

“I’m going to contact Tcharken myself,” Athena declared. “I’m going to tell him that if I don’t hear from Apollo at first light, it will be war.” Cain snorted laughter. “You honestly think that’s going to intimidate them?”

Athena stared coolly at him. “I don’t know what it’s going to do,” she replied. “But I know it won’t be what they’re expecting. Maybe if I push a few buttons, I can find out what’s going on. In the meantime, let’s make sure we’re ready.”

“My officers are telling me we don’t stand a chance,” Cain confessed.

“I’m surprised they have the gall to say that to your face,” Athena replied. “What do you think, Cain?”

“I’ve been up against worse odds, and I’m still here,” Cain said firmly. To her dismay, the first words that rose into Athena’s mind were, *Then your luck’s running out*.

She kept the thought to herself.

Later, alone in her quarters, Colonel Athena gazed out a small viewing portal at the starfield beyond. There were two Chitain craft in visual range, and she stared at them, still and ominous against the stars.

“What in the name of all the Lords do you want?” she whispered aloud. Then she said a silent prayer for Apollo and for Starbuck. Apollo slept, and in his sleep, Apollo dreamed.

He is standing within the heart of one of the great Ships of Light, the spacecraft of the Lords of Kobol. Though he is in its heart, strangely, he can also see beyond the ship, to the planet below. It is Poseidon. Though surely it was not called that then. For this is another time. A time of Then, not of Now or of When. A time before his brother Zack or his father Adama had moved on from this life and progressed to the light, evolved to the level where they might exist with the Lords, the legendary Thirteenth Tribe of Kobol. Another time.

Then suddenly he is no longer on board the Lightship. Rather, Apollo stands, a beam of light himself, or at least it feels that way— as though his whole body were nothing but pure energy. He stands there like a god, and stares in grief and horror at the fires—

— at the black smoke blotting out the sky.

— at the huge obelisk jutting like the hilt of a blade from the earth, as mountains of human flesh— mountains made of hundreds upon thousands of corpses— burn with a greasy crackle and a stench like nothing he has ever experienced.

And nearby, another fire. Electrical. Popping and snapping. A large starship with tentacles and a long, deadly tail. Inside, its crew burns along with their ship, shells blackening and cracking. Finally, Apollo moves on. He is back on board the Ship of Light, and the planet he would one day know as Poseidon is lost in the past, and in the future. For the Lords of Kobol have planted or nurtured many seeds across the universe. Some will wither and die, and others will thrive. But they must watch over all of those seeds if humanity is ever to achieve its destiny.

Bodies. Burning black.

That stench.

"Unnnnhh!" Apollo woke with a small cry, bringing his hands immediately to his face to try to wipe away the odor of burning flesh. It was only a dream, but the stench lingered.

And now there was something else haunting him, something else going on. He had fallen asleep while on sentry duty—a lapse that he would curse himself for later. But for now, as he pushed the horror of the dream away, he had to focus on the dark chamber around him.

Something was amiss.

And as soon as he thought of it, he knew what that was: they had an uninvited guest. Apollo squinted into the darkness. It felt as though someone had been moving through the room and just frozen, as if he had seen something in his peripheral vision and then that thing had just disappeared.

The son of Adama reached out with his mind. Starbuck and Boomer still slept, though fitfully, on their beds of sand. Gar'Tokk, however, was awake and alert. It seemed that their intruder had also roused the Noman. But Gar'Tokk did not move; he merely waited for the unwelcome visitor to reveal himself.

Apollo completed his mental scan of the chamber. He'd found nothing but the members of his embassy. Nothing but…

There *was* another presence. He sensed it now, but rather than locating its mind, Apollo had found a blind spot in his telepathy, a void where he simply could not search. He studiously avoided glancing at the darkened corner several metrons to his right. Then, with a single swift movement, he drew his laser and leaped to his feet, aiming for the darkness. Gar'Tokk moved with him, surging from his berth into the shadows.

"Show yourself!" Apollo barked. "Now!" And then all became clear. It wasn't merely that the shadows were deeper in that corner. There was a passage—a hidden entrance they had not found before.

Gar'Tokk struggled in the darkness a moment, grunting.

"Please…not hurt Aske!" It was a plaintive voice, as cracked and withered as the skin of the creature that Gar'Tokk now dragged deeper into the chamber.

"Apollo…what?" Starbuck was asking, as he and Boomer roused themselves from the sandy floor.

"We have a visitor," Apollo said, staring at the creature that even now struggled weakly in Gar'Tokk's arms.

It was one of the humanoids, one of the slaves who served the Chitain like farm animals. He was an old man, if "man" were the proper term. There were no teeth in his mouth at all, but Apollo took that as a sign of age, rather than a characteristic they all shared, such as the ridges that ran along the middle of their bald, leathery skulls.

"Aske," Apollo repeated. "You speak Kobollian." The realization was a disturbing one. The wretched creature was humanoid, certainly. That implied a shared ancestry somewhere, but it might be millennia and a galaxy apart from where they now stood. But even though his language was truncated, his voice guttural, Aske did, indeed, speak Kobollian.

"Please no hurt Aske," the old thing muttered, eyes darting from Apollo to Gar'Tokk in terror.

"Gar'Tokk," Apollo said.

The command required no more than the Noman's name. Gar'Tokk released the slave, and Aske seemed to fold down into himself in fear. He gibbered now in a language Apollo found completely unintelligible, and which he could only assume was the slave's native tongue.

Once again, Apollo reached out mentally to the humanoid. Once again, he found nothing but a void. Still, he tried to send to Aske the warmth of his own thoughts, the kindness of his intentions, and somehow, whether through Apollo's efforts or not, Aske seemed somewhat pacified. Carefully, Apollo approached him. He crouched so that he could look directly into the cringing man's eyes.

"You speak my language," Apollo said simply. "How?"

"The tongue is the tongue of…of Aske's grandmother," Aske replied, though his lack of teeth make the words garbled.

"What are you doing here, Aske?" Starbuck asked, his tone gentle.

"You help us, yes?" Aske said, and the sad eyes went wide and the toothless mouth forced itself into a grin as the knobby headed man nodded enthusiastically. "You here to take us away? To take Aske home?"

"Apollo?" Boomer asked, and in his name, Apollo heard the question. He shook his head. He wasn't able to read Aske's mind, nor was he able to make any more sense out of the old man's ramblings than the rest of them.

"Where would we take you?" Apollo asked.

Aske only stared at him as though he were stupid. Apollo couldn't blame him. The old man had already told them that much: he expected the Warriors to take him and the other slaves "home," wherever that was. That was something Apollo would very much like to do. If there was another humanoid race in this sector of the galaxy, even in this or a neighboring system, it could be a great deal of help to the Poseidon colonists.

He tried another approach.

"Aske, what made you think we were here to free you?" he asked. Again, the old man stared at him. This time, Apollo stared back. Aske seemed to realize that an answer was required, and after a few microns, he took a hitching breath, his tongue working across the smooth gums of his mouth.

"You…you speak grandmother's tongue. You like us…only better. Like new. You come in glass stars, yes? Shiny glass stars?" Apollo stared at him. Blinked. Ran a hand through his hair. Then he turned to the others.

"The Lightships," he said softly. "He thinks we come from the Lords of Kobol."

Starbuck frowned. Boomer, who had only heard of the ships and not seen them, glanced at the old man curiously. Apollo turned back to Aske,

who stood uneasily next to Gar'Tokk, who towered over the diminutive slave.

"Aske," Apollo began, "your home. Is there a lot of water there?" Aske smiled. "Almost all water," the old man agreed.

"Poseidon," Gar'Tokk said. It wasn't a question. Nor did Apollo have any question in his own mind. Aske—and all the other humanoid slaves on the Chitain homeworld—were descendants of the original colony on Poseidon. Whatever it was called then. *Bodies. Burning black.*

That stench.

"By the Lords," Apollo whispered, and put a hand to his forehead as the dream rushed back at him; the dream, and something more.

He thought of the obelisk stabbing the sky over Poseidon, and the engraving on its side. The many things that were inscribed there. What appeared to be star maps. What appeared to be humans, building huge monuments. Symbols that must have been Ships of Light—the shiny glass stars, as Aske had called them. And, worst of all, a massive heap of humanoid corpses…and atop that mountain of death…

A Chitain warrior.

"Aske, this is important," Apollo said, fixing the old man with his eyes.

"Did your grandmother ever tell you what happened to your home, to the people there? Did the Chitain kill them?"

The old creature considered that for several microns. At last, he shook his head.

"The stingers take grandmother and say they save her," Aske said, face pinched with concentration. "She tell Aske that everybody sick, dying at home. Stingers have people for workers, for slaves, forever. But when babies die, or look like Aske…"

The old man winced, glanced down in shame.

"They say home is…" he said a word in that guttural mumble, then shook his head. "They say home is not…not safe." The old man's face brightened suddenly. "Poison!" he cried, loud enough that Apollo shushed him.

"Poison," Aske whispered. "The stingers say home is poison. Water is poison. They take grandmother, others here. Grandmother never believe them, want to go home."

The slave's face fell, sad again. "Aske want to go home."

“A home he’s never been to,” Boomer noted, irony and pity mixing in his tone.

“Is better than no home at all,” Gar’Tokk said sternly. Boomer flinched, then merely nodded.

They were all silent then, even Aske. Apollo glanced at Starbuck, then Boomer, and finally, at Gar’Tokk.

“You have any idea what all this feldergarb is about?” Starbuck asked.

“‘Cause it might as well be Cylon as far as I’m concerned.”

“He sure hates the Chitain,” Boomer noted. “The ‘stingers.’ But it sounds as though the oral tradition of these people, the slaves here, doesn’t blame the Chitain for what happened to them.”

“Even though the Chitain wiped them out,” Starbuck said bitterly.

“But that isn’t what he said,” Boomer replied, glancing at Starbuck. “He said it was poison.”

Starbuck glanced at Apollo. “You told us about the engravings on that obelisk, Apollo,” he said. “I’ve been thinking about it ever since we got here. That marking didn’t seem to indicate poison to me. Or if there was poison, I’d say it was the Chitain’s doing.”

“No,” Apollo replied, “although they’re clearly dangerous. Hostile to a fault. But it sounds as if they were using the humans on Poseidon for slave labor even before they started to…to mutate,” he said distastefully. “Aske said there were babies born like him. Something on Poseidon must have done some kind of long-term genetic damage to the colonists. The Chitain said it was in the water, but it could be anything. Some bacteria we didn’t scan. Something completely unknown to our sensors. It may have taken many generations before its effects were seen, but by then it would have been too late. The entire population must have been affected. After a time, no unmutated babies would have been born.”

They stared at him until Apollo turned to Gar’Tokk and narrowed his eyes.

“You sensed it,” he said.

Gar’Tokk nodded. “The Nomen understand the balance of nature better than…humans.”

Apollo knew his huge, bestial bodyguard’s hesitation was in order to avoid using a disparaging description of humanity. He nodded his appreciation. He also didn’t ask Gar’Tokk why he had not mentioned this *corruption* of Poseidon before. Apollo suspected none of them would like

the answer, which he surmised to be nothing more complex than this: Gar'Tokk didn't care what happened to humanity, only what happened to Apollo. And Apollo had never planned to stay.

"So, wait," Boomer said. "You're not actually saying that the Chitain *saved* these poor daggitts, are you?"

Apollo narrowed his eyes. "They might well see it like that," he replied.

"I call it slavery."

"This may have something to do with why they haven't attacked the fleet yet," Starbuck said. "Why they're even bothering to have us down here. They don't want to destroy us. They want to *own* us. New slaves to replace the old ones.

"It's a setup."

"The worst part is, even if we get out of here, even if we defeat them," Boomer said sadly, "the Poseidon colony has got to be moved immediately. Who knows what kind of genetic damage those people have already suffered?"

"Cain's not going to like this," Starbuck noted.

"Then Cain can stay behind and be poisoned," Apollo replied. "On the other hand, nobody's going to be able to do anything unless we get out of here first."

Apollo tuned them all out, turned his focus inward. His mind was tight as a laser beam as it stretched out into the ether, concentrating on the *Galactica*. Concentrating on Athena. They had to be warned. For a moment, he sensed her. Then there was nothing but psychic static once again. He groaned, put his face in his hands.

"What is it, Commander?" Gar'Tokk asked.

"I can't even reach Athena to warn her," he replied. "Somehow, this planet, or the Chitain themselves, interfere with telepathic communication. We'll have to get back to the *Starlight*, use the commlink there."

At the mention of the ship's name, Aske's eyes widened with pleasure.

"Starlight?" the old man whispered hopefully.

"Our ship," Apollo replied. "We've got to get out of here." Aske nodded. "Aske show you how to go," the mutate said happily, and turned toward the darkness beyond the hidden entrance to their chamber. Behind them, at the door to the corridor, there came a single, echoing knock.

Chapter Twelve

YOU ARE HERE AS AN ADVISOR AND AN ally, President Cain, not because of your rank as commander. Any campaigns or initiatives *this* fleet undertakes will be with the Council's authorization and under my direction. As Apollo's deputy, I am Acting Commander here, and I do not intend to surrender my responsibilities to anyone but my brother," Athena said, her tone so cold that icicles seemed to form beneath each word. Cain's presence on the *Galactica*, let alone so near its bridge, or even conferring with the Quorum, had not been her idea, but Athena could understand the reasoning behind it. Simply put, the fleet was in turmoil; even without any overt hostilities from the surrounding Chitain forces, it was deemed unsafe for Poseidon's president to travel between battlestars unless absolutely necessary. Which suited certain Quorum members just fine: some thought the presence of a living legend like Cain would boost morale aboard ship, particularly with Apollo away from the fleet for the moment.

But Athena could have done without the commander's presence. Cain made a dismissive sound. "You misjudge me and the situation, Colonel, as does your brother," he said. "You and I are not rivals, and the Chitain are not our enemy. At least, they need not be. That honor belongs to the Cylons. We must work to make the Chitain our allies against them, and not waste our resources on phantom conflicts."

"Nonetheless, I am the Acting Commander of the *Galactica's* forces," Athena said again. "I wish to make that protocol quite clear before the meeting begins."

"And the *Pegasus's* forces are mine," Cain said coolly. "As are all the human resources in this system. Your people are my guests here, Athena. You would do well to remember that."

They were in a small anteroom adjacent to the Council Chamber, a room that seemed too small to contain two such powerful personalities. Cain was in formal commander's garb, every buckle polished, rows of decorations hanging from the tailored expanse of his tunic. He presented a grand, even glorious image, and it was that which had prompted Athena's comment. She was in uniform, too—but she wore her garments as work clothes, not as the robes of office.

Now the Council members wished Cain to provide them with insight into this crisis—as if he were some TransVid analyst—and guidance on how best to deploy available forces, should the need arise. And to Athena that need seemed imminent.

That invitation to Cain had been issued over Athena's official protest. Cain's ways, his dissembling and secretiveness, had brought them all to this crisis, and she worried now that his continued presence might push them over the brink.

Then there was Apollo. That was another source of worry, another source of concern. For Athena, whose composure and calm were key elements of her personality, to feel such fretfulness was a new and unpleasant experience. *Where was Apollo now? What fate had befallen him and his companions*? For the hundredth time, she reached out with her mind, seeking some hint of her brother's thoughts but finding none. Her inability to find Apollo telepathically could be as simple as a function of distance…

Or something decidedly less innocent.

Aske whimpered, terror lending new light to his yellow eyes. He twitched and shivered, and muttered something in his own language. His misshapen fingers plucked at the cuff of Apollo's sleeve, and he tried to drag the Warrior towards the black mouth of the secret entrance of the quarters the Chitain had assigned their guests.

The knock on the door to their chamber came again, more emphatically this time.

"Stingers," Aske said, his terror finally relenting enough to allow him to shape a recognizable world.

Gar'Tokk nodded agreement. He glanced in Apollo's direction. "Five of them," he said, as softly as he could manage.

"How can you tell?" Apollo asked. Already, he had reached out with his mind, tried to determine who was beyond the door and what their motives might be. And he had failed, finding only more of the whispering mental static that had been his too-frequent companion since coming to this world. There was something too alien about the way the Chitain thought for him to get a fix on their thoughts. Indeed, their simple presence seemed to interfere with his ability to access the thoughts and emotions of his fellows, let alone reach across the vast gulf that separated him from his sister and the fleet.

“Heartbeats,” Gar’Tokk said softly, and then said no more. The muscles on his big body stood out in sharp relief as he dropped into a fighting stance. His head dropped slightly as his eyes shifted warily from side to side.

Apollo was impressed. He wondered if the Noman’s senses had been spurred by an adrenaline rush, or if Gar’Tokk could always command such acuity.

The others were reaching for their sidearm lasers. Apollo gave a micron’s thought to diplomatic protocol, and then reached for his own. Even as his fingers curled around the weapon’s plastic stock, however, the door shattered, and something much bigger than a man stood framed in the doorway.

The intruder shone black and red, even in the dim lighting. The Chitain warrior held a spear in its upper left hand and an oddly made battle axe in the upper right. Almost immediately, another of the Chitain, similarly armed, came into view behind it. Both bore an impressive complement of stabbing and slicing weapons, but no energy armaments that Apollo could see.

“Who are you? What is the meaning of this?” Apollo demanded before he realized that he would receive no answer. Only Tcharken, of all the Chitain, could speak Kobollian.

Old, toothless Aske had an answer for him, however.

“They will kill you! Cage you! Like the other!” the pathetic pseudo-human cried, obviously terrified, but unwilling to run. He cowered behind Apollo as the second brute made a series of rasping, clicking noises at its fellow. In apparent response, the first one gestured in Apollo’s direction.

Then things happened fast.

The second Chitain—whose chest carapace was marred with a long curving sigil carved into the shell—made more of the rasping noises that served it as words, and moved past the first. A split-micron later, it jabbed a spear toward Apollo. It was a long shaft of horn-like material tipped with glistening metal. He had seen guards bearing similar spears earlier and wanted to take a closer look.

Not quite this close a look, however.

The spearhead caught his tunic even as Apollo threw himself from the weapon’s path. He felt it cut through the fabric and touch his skin, touch but not cut, and he breathed a silent word of thanks. Moving as quickly as he

could, he raised his sidearm and began to squeeze its trigger. Then the long-scarred Chitain stabbed at him again, but with the spear reversed, so that its blunt base smashed Apollo's sidearm from his hand. The Chitain made a noise that Apollo suspected was laughter. Gar'Tokk howled.

Apollo had heard that sound before—the guttural wail of a Noman in full battle fury: heard it from Gar'Tokk as he had contended against the Borellian in one-on-one battle, heard it from the throats of the other Nomen after their leader fell to a "mere" human. It sounded only slightly less fearsome coming from an ally. Two more Chitain had entered the room. In the now-crowded space, the natives had less room to maneuver, and moved somewhat more slowly than the first, being careful also to keep out of their leaders' path. Boomer raised his sidearm laser and fired it, once, twice, slicing through the extended tail segment of one of the creatures.

Even as Boomer's prey fell, Apollo saw the broad fingers of Gar'Tokk's right hand come together, make a point. The Borellian howled again, and drove the spear he had made of his hand forward in a stabbing motion—to considerable effect.

Gar'Tokk's weaponed hand found its target, the midpoint of the lead creature's thorax. There was a sound like bone breaking, then a wetter noise, and Gar'Tokk's strike slowed as his right hand buried itself inside the Chitain's carapace.

Slowed, but did not stop.

"Frack! Frack! Frack!" Starbuck's familiar voice shaped the word, and then he tumbled out of the path of another Chitain, barely avoiding two clawed hands that slashed in his direction. One of those hands held a knife with a rippling ceramic blade that moved in an arc perilously close to Starbuck's face. Even as he dodged, a lock of his sandy-colored hair came free, sliced loose by the Chitain dagger.

The lead Chitain, the one who had dared attack Apollo, the one with Gar'Tokk's hand buried forearm-deep in its shattered chest, made a surprisingly human sound of pain. His talons shook and spasmed, but did not open or release the weapons they held.

Apollo's gun had tumbled to the sand somewhere in the darkness, and he had no time to look for it. Instead, he grabbed the spear that had struck at him and tore it loose from the lead Chitain's grip. He raised it just in time to block the downswing of an axe wielded by another of the aliens. The heavy shaft of his commandeered spear flexed and bent, but held as it blocked the

downward slice of a cruelly hooked blade. More of the first Chitain's carapace splintered as Gar'Tokk drew back his right hand. His wrist and forearm were covered with blood, both from the creature he had mortally wounded and from where jagged splinters of the Chitain's sundered exoskeleton had cut him. With his left hand, he reached for the dying creature's weapon.

His right hand already held something else.

Starbuck finally managed to raise his own laser then, and a lance of unerring white fire burned a hole through the beetled brow of the third Chitain. The bright sparks of the native's eyes darkened and closed. Gar'Tokk raised his right hand above his head and opened it. Something fell to the floor, something wet and soft that convulsed spasmodically twice, then was still.

"Frack!" the ordinarily restrained Boomer said, the expletive sounding strange in his voice. "Is that its *heart?*"

"Whatever it is, it's vital," Starbuck's sardonic voice came in response. He was right. Mortally wounded, the lead Chitain fell forward and made a sound like muffled thunder as it struck the sandy floor. The surviving two Chitain had been jockeying for position, each trying to be the next to pass through the door. Now, they fell back in what Apollo could only assume was shock and horror. Despite himself, he felt a twinge of sympathy.

They had no doubt expected things to go differently.

Gar'Tokk howled again, a sound of triumph this time. Both hands grasped his other prize. It was a battleaxe, easily two metrons long. It was much too large for a normal human to wield, but it looked oddly at home in Gar'Tokk's hands. One end of the heavy shaft held a massive ax-head, with a cutting edge that was half a metron long. The other end came to a cruel, barbed point, another of the stabbing weapons the Chitain seemed to favor.

The expression on Gar'Tokk's face, a snarling grimace of savage glee, said that he liked it, too—and could use it.

Moving with blinding speed, the Noman drove the spear-point into the chest of one Chitain, where the curve of the creature's jaw met the upper ridge of his thorax segment. More of the dark exoskeletal tissue broke and split as the spear stabbed completely though the creature's chest and buried itself deep in the wall beyond.

"Stinger stung!" Aske cried out, childlike wonder and delight in his voice.

Only one of the Chitain still drew breath, and before anyone could do anything about him, the native had spun on its tail and fled.

“He’ll raise an alarm,” Apollo said. He retrieved his laser, then holstered it in disgust as he realized it was shattered beyond repair. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

“I read you. Any ideas on what route we take?” Starbuck asked.

“At least two,” Apollo said. He glanced at the corridor, and then at the hidden entrance to their erstwhile quarters. “We’ve got to split up. Someone has to make it back to the *Starlight*.” Boomer nodded. “Starbuck and I will take the main corridor,” he said.

“We’ll draw their fire. You go with Aske.”

“You’re likely to encounter more of them in the main corridor. I can’t let you take the more dangerous path,” Apollo said. “Phaedra…”

“You have to,” Boomer said simply. “We have lasers, you don’t.” Gar’Tokk had torn his confiscated axe free from its grisly target now. He held it with both hands and grunted with satisfaction. “Apollo doesn’t need a laser,” the Noman said grimly.

They all stared at him a moment as the meaning of his words sunk in. Apollo didn’t need a laser because Gar’Tokk would be with him.

“Big guy has a point,” Starbuck said with a trademark grin. The *Galactica* was a busy, noisy place, and never more so than in times of battle, or in preparing for one. As the surrounding fleet readied itself for possible combat, and as on-duty personnel drove themselves to new extremes, one area remained quiet—a small observation deck just aft of the main launch tubes. In peaceful times, this was a place where lovers might meet to whisper terms of endearment, or thinkers might go to ponder their place in the cosmos.

Now, with the fleet surrounded by potentially hostile vessels of unknown capability, dangerous reminders of humanity’s embattled status, Phaedra and Guinn had the place to themselves.

“He’s out there, somewhere,” Phaedra said softly, staring out a wide view port at the surrounding cosmos.

She stood as close as she could to the blackness outside, and stared at it with eyes that were scarcely less dark. When battle came, armored slabs would extend themselves over the viewports and the deck area itself would close.

And battle would come, she knew, whether with the Chitain or with the Cylons or with some other menace. War seemed to her to be the one constant in human existence.

And Boomer was a Warrior.

"Yes, he's out there. But he's *in here*, too," she continued, resting one hand on the smooth curve of her abdomen. It felt as it always had, but she knew that it was different. She was too early in her term for any sign of her pregnancy to show, but she could feel the new life inside her.

"He'll be back," Guinn said. She was a good match for her husband, Jolly—big but not fat, broad and taller than many men, but still feminine. She was sprawled on a couch set well back from the viewports, and her features were tired and drawn. She had finished a double shift of her own duties less than half a centon before and had been on the way to her quarters for rest when she had noticed Phaedra here.

"I've worried about that Jolly of mine many times," Guinn continued.

"He wedges himself into one Viper or another, and leaves me at home to fret about him. Then he comes back and he eats too much, and drinks his grog, and tells me his tales." She smiled wistfully. "Then I worry some more."

Phaedra almost smiled, too.

"Have you given thought to a name yet?" Guinn asked. Phaedra shook her head. Many of the Warrior's husbands and wives had asked her that same question, and she had explained more than once that her family's tradition was to wait until the child was born before making such a momentous decision. Or, if the urge would not be denied, to choose a name and then keep it a secret until the new life was ready to take it.

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"A boy," Phaedra said, seeing Boomer's face with her mind's eye. Then she wondered how that face would look, remade with younger features.

"If Cain is right, if Apollo and the Quorum agree, there's a home on Poseidon for any who want to settle there," Guinn continued. "A new world. They say it's a good place to raise a family."

"Boomer and I have talked about that," Phaedra said, her voice carefully neutral. "But for now, at least, Boomer says his place is with the fleet, and I know that my place is with him."

"The fleet's good enough, I suppose, but a child needs more than steel and recycled air," Guinn continued. "More than war. If I had a son, I'd want

him to have more than that."

"We all want more than that," Phaedra said. "For ourselves, and for our children."

"Tyr is a good name for a boy," Guinn said softly. "I had a brother named Tyr. A good name…" Her words trailed off, and the fatigue on her face gave way to sorrow.

"And a good man," Phaedra said, stepping away from the port and joining her friend on the couch. "I remember Tyr." Phaedra remembered laughing eyes and gentle hands, and a young face made older by the sights that his sparkling eyes had seen. She had not known Tyr well, but she remembered him.

Tyr had been a Viper pilot in the Colonial fleet, much-decorated and widely admired and among the first casualties in the Great Betrayal. He had fallen before the Cylons, even as Boomer or Jolly might fall before the Chitain now.

"Isn't it strange?" Guinn said, still speaking softly, her eyes suddenly bright. "I haven't spoken his name for yahren, but he's never far from my thoughts."

Phaedra looked at her, unsure what to say. Many had died during the Great Betrayal, so many that nearly every family in the *Galactica's* fleet had been touched by tragedy. Guinn was so strong, so nurturing, that it was sometimes easy to forget that she was the last of her bloodline. Jolly was all she had now, and had been, for a very long time. Guinn was crying, softly and quietly, the diamond-bright tears flowing freely down her cheeks. Whether she wept for the past or for the future, Phaedra could not be sure.

"We've fought so hard, come so far," Guinn said. "And all we've found is another enemy."

"We don't know that yet," Phaedra said. "We can't be certain." Even to her own ears, the words sounded hollow.

"Oh, Phaedra," Guinn said, still weeping, her huddled shoulders shaking. "I'm so sorry. I wanted to be strong. I wanted to cheer you, and I don't seem to be doing a very good job of it."

Phaedra sat on the couch, next to her friend, and draped one arm around the older woman's shoulders.

"There," she said. "You're doing better than you think. I'm a lucky woman, to have a friend such as you, and Boomer and Jolly are lucky, too." She paused a moment, considering. Then…

“You’re right,” Phaedra said. “Tyr is a good name.” Neither said anything more as, together, they gazed out at the star-dappled blackness surrounding their home, and took some solace from the simple fact that the viewports were still open and unshielded. That was a ready reminder that war had not come again.

At least, not yet.

“We use this way,” Aske said, panting as he stumbled and shuffled swiftly along the sand floor. “Others, like Aske. Use this path to do work.” The hidden entryway had been a servant’s entrance, and the corridor that connected to it ran between the kitchens and utility areas of the citadel. For whatever reason, the passage seemed designated exclusively for the humanoids’ use; none of Apollo’s party had seen any sign of the Chitain since entering it.

He and his companions made an odd trio, Apollo realized as he moved quickly with Aske and Gar’Tokk through the shadowed corridor that ran between the walls of the Chitain citadel. Each was derived of human stock, but none were typical of the species.

Aske, sadly, was nearly subhuman, and his forebears had been damaged, ruined, and maimed by some unknown factor on the planet that was now Cain’s home.

Gar’Tokk, like his fellow Nomen, was both less than human and more, almost bestial in his savagery, yet noble in his adherence to a code of honor that Apollo still found baffling. The Noman’s highly evolved senses and sinews were nearly superhuman. Apollo had found that out the hard way; the primary reason he had survived his match with Gar’Tokk was because of his own emerging Kobollian capabilities, psychic skills that set him apart from most of his own people.

Those skills flared suddenly if faintly to life now, as he ran past the dark mouth of another, branching passageway.

Unbidden, he could feel the merest hint of sensations at the back of his mind, muffled but blocked: Fear; pain. Desperation; pain. Rage; pain. No words, no higher concepts, no articulated messages, only primal emotions, all in a mental “voice” that, even obscured, was disturbingly familiar. Aske’s earlier words came back to Apollo now. ” *Like the other*,” the humanoid had said.

Apollo stopped in his tracks, so suddenly that both Aske and Gar’Tokk continued for several steps past the intersection before realizing that they

had left him behind.

"No! No!" the toothless oldster pleaded. "No stop! Run! Stingers come!

Run!" He clutched the sleeve of Apollo's jacket and tugged, desperate terror in his eyes.

Gar'Tokk said nothing, but shot Apollo a questioning look.

"Aske," Apollo said. "Who is *the other?"* Aske whimpered.

"Who is the other?" Apollo demanded again, trying hard to underscore the question with a mental probe.

"A she," Aske said. He trembled and looked in Gar'Tokk's direction, then back at Apollo. "Stingers took her. A she, not like Aske's she. Like you."

A final puzzle piece clicked into place in Apollo's mind, and he knew who was the source of the emotions that had just flashed through his mind. The vague sense of familiarity gave way to absolute recognition, so sudden and emphatic that it could not be ignored.

Sheba was here!

"Take me to her!" Apollo said.

"No! No! Run! Run!" Aske babbled, convulsed with terror.

"Take me to her. Now!" Apollo demanded, hope and fury combining to give his words a deadly emphasis. "If you want my help, if you want your people to ever see their homes again, take me to the she!" Aske moaned, and then beckoned for Apollo and Gar'Tokk to follow as he shuffled down the branching corridor.

Starbuck took the lead as he and Boomer moved quickly through the shadowed corridors. It was hard to see in the Chitain citadel; the hallways were only dimly lit, and the tunnels were a winding warren of confusion. Either their hosts were substantially less active during their equivalent of light cycle, or, more likely, the Chitain's eyes were adapted for different frequencies than humans'. It was entirely possible that, to Tcharken or Schikik, the shadowed dimness surrounding them now was as bright as daylight.

The thought was unsettling. He and Boomer were in their enemies'

stronghold, only lightly armed and heavily outnumbered. Poor visibility was a disadvantage he did not need.

He picked up the pace a bit, moving at not quite a run, and glanced back. Boomer was keeping up easily enough, his rapid footfalls making muffled thumps on the shifting sands. Both men had good senses of

direction, and Starbuck had taken careful note of the various twists and turns their entry into the citadel had taken. They were doing their best to retrace those steps now, and, as near Starbuck could tell, they were more than halfway to the nearest exit.

Thus far, they had encountered no resistance.

"Too good to last," he said softly, just loud enough for Boomer to hear.

"I know, I know," came the hushed response. "That fifth guard must have sounded an alarm by now. We can't…"

A hand erupted from the sand and tried to clutch Starbuck's ankle. He felt and heard it, rather than saw it, and yanked his foot back just fast enough to clear the grasping fingers before they closed their grip. The effort, however, was enough to make even the agile Starbuck lose his balance and stumble.

He fell to the packed sand floor just in time to turn and see the black-and-red form of a Chitain warrior erupt from below. Sand rained on him as the Chitain's head and chest came into view. The creature's emerging upper body was followed by the long, jointed segments of its tail. Three of its four hands held long-bladed daggers that came to needle points; the fourth was empty, thanks only to Starbuck's speed. He moved more quickly now. His laser sidearm had not left his hand since the incident with Gar'Tokk and the others. He fired, sending a blast racing in the Chitain's direction.

The Chitain made a hissing click and dodged, undulating sideways on the extended sections of its tail section. The laser beam missed the low-set skull and burned instead into the ceiling above, so that chips of burned chitin rained down. The monster clicked and hissed some more, then slashed at Starbuck with one of his blades. Starbuck dodged again, writhing sideways across the shifting sands.

Shifting?

The Colonial Warrior's eyes tried to leave their sockets as he saw more horn-covered hands thrust up from below, and he finally realized how the Chitain were doing this. It made a sick kind of sense. This world was a dry one, but the contours of the Chitain's bodies suggested a kind of streamlining. The explanation was obvious. They had evolved from burrowing ancestors, and had not fully lost the habit.

"Starbuck!" Boomer yelled. "They can move through the sand!"

"Glad you see it too!" Starbuck snapped. "I thought I had brain crystals or something."

Starbuck squeezed off another shot, and felt some small degree of satisfaction as one of the groping hands retreated and a muffled cry of pain could be heard.

Boomer was busy, too. Another Chitain had clambered up through the sandy floor. It hissed and spat at the other Warrior, but not with any of its crafted weapons. Instead, the creature's segmented tail twisted and bent, and the cruel point that formed its tip shot toward Boomer's heart.

"Stingers," Boomer said softly, quoting Aske. He danced backward, careful to avoid yet another hand that reached for him from below. The attacker's tail found only sand to strike, and the aggressive Chitain warrior nearly lost its balance as the force of its blow buried the tail point deep in the corridor floor.

Boomer fired his laser pistol, and the Chitain moved no more. Yet another carapace-covered skull sprouted from the sands. Four angry eyes glared at Boomer, and four hands reached for him, one with a hole already burned neatly through its palm. Boomer fired his laser a second time, then a third, and then rolled out of the way as the Chitain fell forward with a thud.

More followed. They sprouted from the sand like some hellish crop on a nightmare farm, erupting in rapid sequence from the floor. One after another, a half-dozen Chitain warriors thrust themselves into view. They reached for the two humans, sliced and stabbed and speared at them, then fell as laser bursts seared vital organs.

"They must be able to hear us," Starbuck said, as the tide of flesh seemed to pause. He fired another laser burst, and another Chitain fell.

"With the noise we're making, it's no wonder," Boomer responded. He paused and stood, poised for action, but none came. The most recent warrior had apparently been the last…for now.

Starbuck shook his head, and took in the carnage that the two of them had wreaked. "It's our footsteps," he said. "Sand is a good sound conductor, and they must have been able to hear us through it, running."

"So what do we do now? Lasers are running low. We can't keep this up, and we can't just stand here and wait for them."

Starbuck stepped closer to the wall, ignoring for the moment the grisly details of its construction. He scuffed one boot against the sand and nodded, pleased by what he had found.

"Slow down a bit," he said, "and keep near the edges. The sand is packed harder here."

“Must be part of their construction methods,” Boomer said. Starbuck nodded again. “These walls have inner cores,” he said. “They have to rest on—eh?”

“What is it?”

“Some kind of seam,” Starbuck responded, running his finger tips along the complex surface of the corridor wall. The preserved Chitain armor felt warm beneath his touch. It was almost warm enough to be alive, but he knew that was impossible, so he pushed the thought from his mind and directed his attention instead to the apparent seam he had found. It went up, and across, and then down again, and nearly hidden metal fixtures studded one length of it.

“Hinges,” Starbuck said. “This is a door. Maybe to one of Aske’s hidden passages.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Boomer hissed. “We’ve got to get back to the *Starlight*.”

“We sure do,” Starbuck said. “And this might just be a shortcut. It faces the right direction.” His fingers found a stud, pressed it, and the door swung open.

“Frack,” Starbuck said, staring in genuine horror at what lay revealed beyond, and something close to despair swept over him.

When he moved fast enough, Aske’s odd, shuffling gait gave way to something almost graceful. He leaned forward and ran with his hands, too, traveling on all fours and building up a fair head of speed. He moved fast enough that Apollo had difficulty keeping pace with him. Not Gar’Tokk, however. The Noman loped tirelessly at Apollo’s side, following their strange guide without comment or complaint as he led them down the smaller, slightly better lit corridor.

This passage, like the one they had left, was narrower than those the Chitain used, and not as well maintained. Door after door was set into the grisly architecture, marked with symbols that Apollo could not read. Aske paused in front of one. He pressed the poorly shaped fingers of one hand against the door.

“Here!” he said. “Here! The she is here!” Gar’Tokk reached for the door, but, for once, Apollo was faster. He clasped the handle, squeezed and pushed. The panel swung back, and rank, stale air spilled out. He felt again the primal call of fear in his mind, still muffled, but still familiar.

Chains clinked, and a moan reached his ears.

A moan, in Sheba's voice.

"Lords of Kobol!" Apollo softly.

"A-Apollo?" Sheba said, pain giving way to disbelief. "Oh, thank the Lords!"

Then, for a long moment, there were no words, and no need for them, as Apollo lifted his beloved into his arms.

She was in bad shape, pale and emaciated, with dark hollows beneath her eyes. Her hair, filthy and matted, hung in disarray and her Viper pilot uniform was little more than tattered rags. Animal bites marked her exposed limbs.

"Crashed," she mumbled. "Captured. Some kind of monsters. Like giant crawlons."

Aske nodded at that.

"Those are the Chitain," Apollo said urgently. "We're in the their stronghold now. We have to get you back to the *Starlight*. Can you walk?" he asked, as he gently put her down.

" *S-Starlight*?" Sheba asked. She blinked and staggered, and for a moment, it looked as if she would fall. Gar'Tokk reached out to support her, and she accepted the aid gratefully.

"One of Cain's ships," Apollo said.

"A ship belonging to my—my father?" Sheba asked. "I must…

be…delirious."

Apollo shook his head. "Just woefully out of date," he responded. "Now, can you walk? If you can't, Gar'Tokk can carry you."

"To be your guardian, I must be free to strike," the Noman said, objecting.

"I said, *Gar'Tokk can carry you,'*" Apollo repeated, making the words an order.

Sheba shook her head, then looked as if she wished she hadn't. "I can walk," she said. "I want to walk. Just be ready to catch me if I fall."

"Always," Apollo said. "And forever."

"Status report," Athena spoke into the holo commlink. Around her, Tigh and the other members of the Quorum watched silently as the acting fleet Commander asked questions of her subordinates and issued orders. Plutarch's tired features looked back at her. Fatigue had made the boy genius look not quite so boyish, and his voice was little more than a tired croak as he responded.

“More than half the non-military fleet vessels have been rendered QSE capable,” he said. He had been working closely with the personnel of the *Adena* to mass-produce Quantum Shift Effect generators and install them. The QSE technology, though easy enough to duplicate, was still relatively new to the fleet technicians, and Plutarch knew more about its nuances than anyone.

“Impressive,” Cain interjected. “It speaks well of your production capability.”

Athena turned from her unit’s pickup and glanced at him, annoyed. Despite her explicit directive to the contrary, Poseidon’s president had insisted on interjecting himself into the Quorum’s proceedings and had shown no reluctance to join in the discussions.

Plutarch shook his head. “Not quite as impressive as it sounds, Commander. We couldn’t fabricate that many units that quickly, but I was able to slave some of the larger vessels to the smaller ones. One generator can effect the transition for several ships. It’s not easy, but it can be done.”

“That’s enough, then,” Athena said. “We can evacuate personnel to the equipped or slaved ships. I’ve already issued orders to start a shuttle program.”

Plutarch nodded.

“Turn your attentions to the remainder of the Viper squadrons,” Athena said. “I’m sorry, Plutarch, but for now, there is no rest for the weary.”

“You sound is if you’re preparing for an attack,” Plutarch said slowly. “I could…”

“Attend to the Vipers, Plutarch,” Athena repeated. “I’ll see to it that you have the manpower you need.”

She broke the connection.

Now, it was Cain’s turn to look at her angrily. “You cannot be serious,” he said.

Athena ignored him. Instead, she stood and gazed out over the other members of the Council of Twelve, at the somber faces of her peoples’

leaders. They were the faces of men and women who had seen entirely too much of war, and were obviously reluctant to send their sons and daughters into battle once more.

Her brother’s words, words of only a few cycles ago, came back to her now. *Don’t initiate hostilities! You don’t know who the intruders are, or*

what they can do, Apollo had urged her, speaking in her mind from Poseidon's surface.

Her response came back to her, as well. *I've said the same to you more than once*, she had told him. *I'll keep to my own counsel, thank you*. The irony of what she was about to say sickened her.

"We *must* attack," she said aloud. "We must strike before they do." Bedlam erupted in the Council's Inner Sanctum, a flurry of shouted comments and stridently voiced objections. The preceding centon had been filled with one bad piece of news after another, and most Council members had been able to see only all too well where talks were leading.

"This is madness!" Cain barked, treating the Council to the rare spectacle of a warhawk arguing for peace. "The Chitain are not our enemy, not yet, and this will make them—"

Athena interrupted him. "I remind you, Commander, you are here as an advisor and an ally. You have no formal authority." Cain glared at her.

"The Chitain forces are arrayed around our fleet in hostile formation, and have engaged in what are clearly tactical maneuvers around our forces. This, under the seal of diplomacy. Our ambassadors to their world—*including our fleet's Commander*—are incommunicado on Xerik-7; likely held as prisoners, perhaps worse."

"We don't know that!" Cain spat.

Ignoring him, Athena nodded in the direction of Tigh, who had told her of the etchings found on the ruined obelisk. "And, according to our own findings on Poseidon's surface, there is some evidence of historical hostilities between our race and your so-called potential allies."

"Generations ago, perhaps," Cain retorted, "but not now." He stood, a shocking breach of protocol for a Council meeting, but he ignored the gasp of disapproval uttered by various Quorum members. "Sires and Siresses, I beseech you. Do not allow this to happen. The Chitain will be valuable allies against our true enemies, the Cylons!"

"Yes, the Cylons!" Athena snapped. "The Cylons, who have fought our kind for more than a thousand yahren. No one hates them more than I do!

But I will not allow one danger to blind me to another." Muttered whispers of assent and agreement rippled across the assembled Quorum, and Tigh spoke.

"Athena is correct," he said. "We cannot let the current situation persist. We must mobilize our forces."

First Sire Belloch, then Sire Mikal, and finally, one after another, the Quorum members agreed, until the vote was unanimous.

Athena turned to face Cain, who suddenly looked every yahren of his age. “Advisor and ally,” she reminded him gently, but with a strength that could not be denied. “You’ve advised, and your input has been considered and declined. That leaves ally. Will you stand with your own race, Cain? Or will you let a misguided hope deny us your aid when we need it most?” Cain looked at her levelly, cold rage plainly evident in his gray eyes.

“Never doubt my loyalty, Athena. If you must pursue this campaign, it will be with my full support. This is not a war of my choosing,” he said grimly,

“but it’s one that I’ll win.”

” ‘*We’ll* win,” Athena amended. She sat once more. “We’ll win it together. Now, please, Commander. Sit. We have much to do.”

Chapter Thirteen

TROY HAD ALWAYS REGARDED THE Viper as the very embodiment

of the concept of fighter craft, reduced to its ultimate essence. Future yahren would doubtless see technological refinements—as he had seen refinements in his own young career—but those would be elaborations at best, useless embellishments at worst. The core concept of the Viper, the idea of a small, well-armed and armored, almost infinitely maneuverable ship, was one that was unlikely to change, Troy had always believed. In this, at least, Commander Cain's technical crew had proven him wrong.

"Ready to launch?" Dalton's familiar voice sounded in his ears. He was astounded that there had not been more repercussions from her sound thrashing of Major Belarius, despite the fact that Troy had been the only witness. Apparently the Major's belligerence was well documented. Colonel Athena had instructed Captain Hecate to make an entry in Dalton's permanent record, and that was the end of it.

"Ready," Troy responded, his hands resting comfortably on the navi-hilt between his legs. The energy field that sealed his battle helm had already activated itself automatically as the ship powered up, and everything in his field of vision took on a slightly sparkling aspect as light passed through the charged barrier.

"Knew you were," Dalton said, teasing. Her control and diagnostics panel mirrored his, and each could access all scanner readings. "It's just a formality, after all," she continued.

Troy recognized the literal truth of her words and also the second truth hidden behind them. He knew that Dalton, though she could have denied it, was nervous. He was nervous, too, and all too aware that he had good reason to be.

Co-piloting a new kind of Viper and taking it out in battle for the first time against an unknown enemy would be more than enough to make anyone nervous, let alone a pair of pilots as young as Troy and his beloved. Skreeters seemed to dance in Troy's stomach, and the back of his mouth had gone utterly dry. He licked his lips and waited for the moment to pass. Long yahren before, Dalton's father had told him something Troy had never

forgotten. As a boy, with more than a little hero worship in his heart, he had asked Starbuck if the great Warrior was ever afraid before embarking on a mission.

“Boxey,” Starbuck had responded, using his nowhated nickname, “the only Viper pilots who never get the jitters are the crazy ones. And crazy Viper pilots become dead Viper pilots pretty frackin’ fast.” Troy hadn’t understood the sentiment then, but he did now.

“Launch!”

Tylium-powered pulsars roared, and the sudden acceleration pushed Troy back in his seat. The launch aperture rushed toward them as the Viper Duet threw itself forward. In microns, the Duet punched through the invisible shield of the aperture and roared into the blackness of space—a dark cloak punctuated only by a scattering of stars. Instantly, the Duet’s internal gravity normalized, and Troy’s seat spun on its gimbals, righting him, along with his navi-hilt and instrument display. He knew that Dalton’s cockpit had reoriented itself too, so that both of the doubled craft’s pilots were positioned in equivalent but precisely opposite attitudes.

“Whoosh!” Dalton said, almost laughing. “That was fast! Leave anything behind?”

“Just my morning meal,” Dalton responded. The Duet, driven by paired engines, a total of six pulsars, accelerated more quickly than an ordinary Viper, and the somersaulting twist of his seat hadn’t helped matters. Almost instantly, however, the momentary vertigo passed and the world seemed right again.

“We’ll get used to it,” Dalton said. Then, in different tone, she said,

“Computer! Quantum shift, now!”

The QSE kicked in with instantaneous effect. In a split-micron, the universe changed; or, rather, the Viper Duet’s relationship with it did. The stars, already brilliant, seemed to grow larger, and the black spaces between them shrank. Instead of darkness, the cosmos now seemed filled only with multi-colored light, a pale radiance that cast the cockpit’s interior details into stark relief.

The Duet banked, rolled, twisted in space as Troy and Dalton alternately put it through its paces. Some directives came from Troy’s navi-hilt and sometimes from Dalton’s, but after a few centari it was difficult to tell which. Neither took the lead, but each piloted the twinned craft perfectly, anticipating one another’s next move with the effortless and reciprocal

intuition that came equally from long training and longer intimacy. Troy and Dalton moved easily as one, and the Viper Duet moved with them in a strangely graceful dance.

It was a dance few other pilots could have participated in. It was a dance for matched souls.

In the space surrounding them, Troy knew, other fighter craft had been launched from the battlestars, and some of them had cloaked themselves in the QSE field. He also knew that none of those other craft were quite like the Duet. There were two other Duets, but as this was the only one equipped with QSE, this flight was the new-generation Viper's field test.

"Enemy activity," Dalton said.

"Got it," Troy responded, glancing at his scanner. The red pinpoints that represented members of the Chitain fleet were shifting into a new configuration.

"Think they can see us?" Dalton asked.

"No, not us," Troy said. The possibility that the Chitain were QSE-capable had been considered and rejected by the best scientific theoreticians the fleet had to offer. There was another possibility, however.

"They can't see us, but they can see some of the other fleet craft, and they must have seen the flash from our launch," he said. "Probably other signs of activity, too. Comm noise, if nothing else. They know something's going on, they just don't know what."

"Let's show them," Dalton said grimly. "Computer, quantum off, now!" Troy nodded, knowing that she could not see him, but knowing that she sensed his agreement. By now, they were well into the halo of hostile craft that surrounded the *Galactica's* fleet. Even as the ship dropped back into normal space, one gloved finger, whether it was hers or his did not matter, stroked a turbolaser actuator key. A stabbing bolt of incandescence spewed forth, and found its target—a Chitain warship.

Troy's vision dimmed slightly as his helm's energy field adjusted to protect his eyes against the explosion's flash effect. He could hear chips of shrapnel from the shattered craft find his vessels shields, bounce off, and whirl away into the cosmos.

"QSE shift now!" he snapped, and they were back in quantum space where he could hear nothing but his co-pilot's exultant shout.

"First blood," Dalton cried, with satisfaction and even delight. "First shot, first blood!"

“But not the last,” Troy responded grimly. The space surrounding them was now alive with turbolaser bolts and explosions.

The war had begun.

This was how it would be fought, Troy knew, or, at least, how he and Dalton would fight their part of it. Feint and parry, strike and run, shifting into normal space only long enough to target and fire their turbolasers. That was the way that the other QSE ships would fight, too, sowing confusion and drawing fire, while their sister ships took advantage of the chaos and waged their battles in normal space.

The scanner on the control panel flashed, and a warning tone sounded. Jolly glanced at his Viper’s display, saw an angry red blip of light flare and go dark. Even without querying the computer for details, he knew what had happened. An enemy craft had been destroyed. One of the QSE-cloaked Vipers—probably Troy and Dalton’s Duet—had taken the first blood, as planned. Jolly allowed himself a micron to cheer silently, then turned his attention to other, more pressing matters. The Chitain response would doubtless be something other than cheers. Now that the first shots had been fired, the fleet would learn just how skilled their new foes were, and how deadly.

“Blue Squadron, fully deployed!” Jolly said crisply into his commlink. By military standards, Jolly’s manner was relaxed, even easygoing under most circumstances. But put him behind the navi-hilt of a Viper, and he was all business. “Attack formation, keep your scanners primed,” he continued. “We don’t know much about these mugjapes or what they can do, so be ready for anything!”

One after another, the Viper pilots assigned to Blue Squadron responded with terse acknowledgements or brief situation reports. The last to call was Marcellus, sounding so confident that Jolly felt a twinge of worry.

“Received, sir!” the young man said. “But these aren’t Cylons, after all!”

“Trank it, Ensign Marcellus,” Jolly ordered. “Or I’ll let you stow it on the *Galactica*, and assign your Viper to a pilot with the right attitude.” Only silence answered him, as Marcellus and the others paused to consider his harsh words.

“Received, sir,” a chastened Marcellus said at length.

“Easy, son,” Jolly said. He had been young once, himself. “We’re all on the same side. But you have to remember, you won’t be any less dead if one

of these crawlons gets you."

"Yes, sir!" Marcellus said. "And watch your port!" Jolly's display bleeped another warning, and he saw what had prompted Marcellus' final comment. A red blip, Chitain configuration, lay off his port wing within turbo range.

His range, and the Chitain's range as well, apparently.

Turbolaser fire, or something very much like it, splashed against Jolly's port wing. The Viper's shield bore the brunt of it, but enough got through to make the compact ship rock and shudder. System alarms sounded as the power system diagnostic automatically came on line and displayed its findings.

The apex pulsar was in trouble. The big thruster that sat high on the Viper's rear was misfiring. Enough of the blast had gotten through to push the motor's tylium core out of synch. Another half-centari or so, and it would restablilize automatically, but for the moment…

Jolly yanked the navi-hilt to his left, hard, and the Viper rolled and bucked. The remaining pulsars weren't strong enough to effect a major change in his trajectory, at least not at his present speed, but space wheeled crazily around him as Jolly did what he could to effect evasive maneuvers. The Viper shifted, spun, danced in instant response to his desperate commands.

His scanners flashed a warning again, and more scarlet weapons fire sprayed from the Chitain warcraft's stingers. It traced a fiery angle through the volume of space where Jolly had been a moment before, then flashed again, coming closer this time. Jolly ignored it; misses didn't count in space warfare, any more than they did in triad. One micron passed, then another, and his scanners flashed a new, more reassuring display.

The apex had nearly realigned itself.

"Lieutenant!" Marcellus called. "Are you hit? Do you require aid?"

"Negative, Ensign," Jolly said. Then another splash of Chitain fire made a glancing strike, and Jolly had to wonder if he was in need of aid, after all. Klaxons blared inside his Viper as the apex pulsar misfired again, and a sizeable chunk of Jolly's starboard wing exploded into saligium vapor. Jolly had been trying desperately to sight his own turbolaser on the attacking craft, trying and failing. His flight path, made more erratic by the new damage, made that task even harder now. Once, the targeting frame found the spindle-shaped vessel, but slid away before even Jolly's hair-trigger

reflexes could react. He cursed softly. He was almost defenseless until the apex came back on line, and the diagnostic had reset itself again.

Jolly needed another half-centari, and he didn't have it.

Suddenly, light and sound flooded his cramped cockpit, and not just from his scanner display. Some light came from outside the Viper, where his Chitain quarry had just exploded into shrapnel, and some of the sound was the ringing, clanging thunder that such debris made as it bounced from his primary shield. The sounds of impact resonated through the Viper's structure loudly enough to make Jolly's ears hurt, but he loved them just the same. A quick glance at his scanner told the rest of the story, and Jolly let a smile flow across his features.

"Good shooting, Marcellus," he commlinked to the Ensign he had rebuked only centari before. "Thanks!"

"Thank you, Lieutenant!" Marcellus said. "Just note it in my first review!"

"Then hang close until my apex recycles, so I'll have the chance." Troy and Dalton had very nearly ceased speaking to one another, reserving their concentration instead for the scanner displays and system displays, and for the dancing image of their weapons' targeting frame and the turbolaser actuator. There was little need for the spoken word as they worked together to pilot the Viper Duet in and out of QSE state. Little need, and little time. It was more difficult than either of them could ever have expected.

However, after the first few centari, they had seemed to find each other's rhythm. Troy fired port, Dalton fired starboard in effortless alternation, changing targets as circumstances dictated. They were acting almost on instinct now, the paired starfighters working as an extension of their bodies. A single syllable from Dalton's lips was enough to alert Troy to a new target; a brief word or two from Troy could tell her to take evasive action as an armored Chitain warcraft came rushing toward them. The Chitain were excellent fighters, savage and effective. Already, they had recovered from the shock of finding a "phantom" Viper in their midst, and had divined at least part of the flight pattern Troy and Dalton were using. Twice, when one of the two issued the command and the Duet phased back into normal space, a Chitain fighter seemed to anticipate them and target the point of their reappearance. Twice, but not three times; on the third, cued by a brief comment from Dalton, Troy waited longer before telling the computer to activate the QSE generator. That wait restored the advantage of

surprise, and a single stroke of Dalton's thumb on the navi-hilt blasted the hostile into oblivion.

And the battle went on.

The hidden door swung back and Starbuck stared at what lay revealed.

"Frack," he said, suddenly looking genuinely horrified. Boomer had to agree. The hinged panel had been crafted of Chitain shells, like so much of the rest of this citadel. But that had been only its outer surface. The chitinous outer layer was bonded to a metal core, and the duality reflected that of his and Starbuck's surroundings. Behind them were the winding corridors and sandy floors of the Chitain stronghold. Before them were the cold, hard lines of a disturbingly familiar architecture. Gleaming saligium beams held heavy stone blocks, locked in an unyielding array. Six-sided tiles made up the floor beyond the threshold, a wide landing that fanned out ended in a broad staircase leading downward. After the highly textured, obviously organic spaces they had seen before, this place seemed almost shockingly sterile. Boomer had seen a place like this before, in holo-images that Starbuck had brought back from his recent exploits while marooned on an outpost world.

"Now, what," Starbuck said, "would our slithering hosts need with stairs?"

It was a good question. The Chitain's unique mode of transportation was better suited to graceful inclines than to incremental steps.

"None," Boomer said. "And you know that. This place isn't Chitain make. Not entirely."

"No," Starbuck said, very slowly. "No, it isn't. I think we both know what this looks like. That means we investigate."

He didn't sound very happy at the prospect.

Boomer nodded in silent assent, and took the lead. Sidearm laser grasped firmly in hand, ears attuned to the slightest sound, he led his companion down two flights of saligium-edged stairs.

Why stairs? The Chitain had no use for them, and might even find them more of an obstacle than an ascensior would be. That might be the answer, Boomer realized. If who he suspected had built this installation, they might well have taken pains to make in unattractive to their hosts. Not inaccessible, but unattractive.

The Cylons liked their privacy, after all.

That was who had built this hidden stronghold, Boomer knew. The staircase, the architecture, even the hexagonal design of the floor tiling, all were signature design elements of the human race's greatest enemies. The thought sat with sick certainty in his mind as he and Starbuck finished their descent and faced the darkened mouth of an underground corridor.

"This isn't a good idea," Starbuck said.

"It was your idea," Boomer returned.

Starbuck nodded in acknowledgement. "That doesn't make it a good one," he said. "Just a necessary one." He spoke softly, little more than a whisper, but his words carried well in the still, cool air. Cool, in stark contrast to the arid heat of the citadel above. They were in a controlled environment now, one made for the comfort and smooth functioning of machines, and not of crawlon-like desert dwellers. To Boomer, it was as if they had stepped into another world, but one that was no less threatening.

"Cain said he hadn't encountered Cylons in six yahren or more," Boomer said, remembering Apollo's report.

"Yeah, and just one scout, then. That bothered me," Starbuck said.

"Cylons move in flocks. Stragglers are always on their way to other Cylons, and they investigate their losses. That scout ship shouldn't have been alone, and others should have come looking when it didn't report back.

"That would mean this installation has been here a long time," Boomer said slowly. "Why haven't they attacked Cain's people?"

"Maybe, they had other business in the area," Starbuck said, weighing the possibilities. "Maybe they wanted to keep a low profile until that business was done."

"What kind of business?"

The corridor bent now, and widened. They had walked a considerable distance now, probably beyond the outer perimeter of the Chitain citadel. Boomer and Starbuck still moved quietly and carefully, but, so far, there had been no sign of occupancy, Cylon or Chitain or otherwise. Boomer had to wonder why.

"Working with the Chitain, for starters," Starbuck said. "They should make a good match, like leaves from the same fallaga plant." There was some truth to his words, Boomer realized. The Cylons had made use—temporary use—of vassal races in the past, and the Chitain might well be willing to serve them, in return for technological guidance.

“That makes sense,” Boomer said. “Can’t just be to attack the colony on Poseidon, though, or they would have done that already. Cain’s forces just get stronger every day. No, the Cylons must have other plans. Maybe this region has a strategic importance to them.”

“Or maybe they were just too busy constructing a launch facility?” Starbuck asked sourly, as they turned a final corner.

Boomer saw what he meant. The corridor opened on a huge, vaulted chamber, carved from the living rock strata that lay beneath Xerik-7’s shifting sands. Parts of the space looked natural, as if its architects had started with an existing cavern, then expanded it and extended its boundaries.

They had extended those boundaries far, indeed. As an engineering accomplishment, this find was more impressive by far than anything they had seen on Poseidon or on the Chitain homeworld’s surface. The giant cavern was nearly large enough to swallow the *Galactica* whole, and it housed a jumble of fuel processing and foundry equipment. The roof of the original cave had been replaced with huge saligium shutters set in massive tracks, obviously retracting doors. Other doors, smaller but still heavily armored, studded the walls.

“Looks like a battlestar launch bay, but bigger,” Starbuck said softly, his typical humor replaced with genuine awe.

“Or a holding facility,” Boomer said, seeing something. He pointed. Starbuck turned and saw—in one corner of the huge installation, dwarfed by the sheer immensity of its surroundings—the *Starlight*.

“The Chitain never meant to let us leave,” Boomer said. “They must have impounded the ship immediately after we landed.”

“Looks like this side-trip was a good idea, after all,” Starbuck said, suddenly cheerful again. “At least it got us where we wanted to go, even if we didn’t know.”

That was when they heard the footsteps.

More weapons fire split the void, and more debris filled it as a battle cruiser fell to the Chitain forces. Three of the Chitain warships had made their way through the defense perimeter and found the vessel, then concentrated their combined fire on it.

“The *Hyapatia* is lost,” Athena said, naming one of the Poseidon colony’s warships. Unbidden, more words came to her lips. “I’m sorry, President Cain.”

Cain barely noticed her words. He stood at the command station created for him on the *Galactica's* bridge, busily conferring via commlink with members of his own forces, coordinating a combined strike of Viper Duets. Despite his initial hesitation, he had thrown himself wholeheartedly into the war effort, and took much more of a hands-on approach with his fleet than Athena did. A dozen voices issued status reports to the legendary commander, and he processed them with the ease of long practice.

"They're concentrating on the third sector," he snapped at someone, somewhere. The mapping computers had divided local space into a series of sectors, with Poseidon as a reference point. "They must see a weak spot there, even if we don't. Athena, what's in your part of the third sector?"

"Third sector? Median casualties there. Mostly *Galactica* forces. Non-military vessels, but heavily guarded."

"Where is the *Adena*? Cain demanded.

Athena checked. "Third sector," she said.

Cain nodded. "That's what they want. I suggest you redouble coverage there, if you can spare the forces."

"The *Adena* isn't heavily armed. It shouldn't be an attractive target," Athena said.

"Shouldn't be, but is. They're thinking in long-term. If they can destroy our capabilities to fabricate new weapons and crafts, they don't have to win this siege."

"What about the Poseidon facilities?" Athena demanded, after alerting Hecate's squadron to the danger.

Cain barked orders at his own forces, then glanced grimly in her direction. "I've made Poseidon my world," he said levelly. "Nothing will take it from me. Nothing, and no one."

Hecate's turbolasers spat two, three, four bolts of energy at the enemy ship. Two of them struck a Chitain vessel, punching holes it its hull. The Red Squadron leader smiled in grim satisfaction as her scanner told the tale. The area surrounding the Chitain vessel was clouded now with exploding, freezing gasses that had escaped its sundered hull. The hits had been good ones; she had damaged the spindle-shaped vessel badly. Not badly enough, however. She realized that as her own scanners screamed a warning, and she yanked the navi-hilt back, hard enough and quickly enough to avoid the energy blast that had been fired in her direction, but just barely.

“Still got some sting, don’t you?” she demanded, knowing that her foe could not hear her. She cut the pulsars, taking just enough thrust from her starfighter to give her one more shot at the enemy vessel. Again, her scanners shrieked a warning, and again the hostile vessel trained its weapons on her. The Chitain response was fast, but she was faster, and a micron later, only a quickly dispersing cloud of debris hung where the enemy ship had been.

There had been a time in Hecate’s life when she would have paused to exult in her victory, but that time was past. She had fought too many battles to view them as anything but grim tasks to be completed, and she had known enough victories to know that the final accounting was all that mattered.

“Red Squadron! Status! Damage assessment!” she said into her commlink, and was rewarded with a series of eager affirmations. One after another, her pilots responded, a nearly complete roll call. The war was going well, or as well as could be expected. Causalities were running relatively low; she knew with some sorrow that she would never hear Ensign Roman’s voice again, or Byron’s. The Chitain fleet was putting up a good and tenacious battle, but they were also being driven back, kilon by kilon, away from the *Galactica* and her supporting fleet. Victory was, if not imminent, at least within sight. Still, something about the opponent’s tactics disturbed Hecate.

“Something’s wrong here,” a concerned voice said.

“What is it, Freyja?” Hecate demanded. The three words, spoken in the erstwhile cadet’s surprisingly mature tones, immediately dispelled Hecate’s tentative feelings of confidence. “Are you under attack?”

“Strategic concerns, Captain Hecate,” Freyja said. “I’ve taken out two of the mugjapes’s ships. But it looks to me like they’re running unnecessary risks. Coming too close before striking, coming within range without firing. It’s like they’re taking our measure.”

“Keep you eye on the scanners, Ensign, and let the Commanders worry about our enemy’s tactics,” Hecate returned. “You do your job, and they’ll do theirs.”

But, privately she agreed with the young pilot. It had been a perceptive assessment. The Chitain were fighting hard, but they weren’t fighting smart. Freyja’s words had given form to Hecate’s uneasy feelings. There was more to this conflict than met the eye.

Siress Kiera left the ascensior and strode down the crowded corridor, making effortless headway against the human tide flowing in the opposite direction. The first wave of Viper fighter pilots, or what was left of them, were already returning to the *Galactica's* launch bay for refueling and repair, and many fleet citizens were headed there either to lend aid or inquire after loved ones. Kiera was not among them. She had other concerns, and other goals.

Baltar's assigned quarters were on an upper deck, modestly appointed but comfortable. They were most assuredly not prison quarters, but simple civilian spaces, with only a few modifications made for their special occupant.

One of those modifications was the absence of any security lock on the chamber's door. Apollo had insisted on that, his own contribution to the oppressive measures that the Council had imposed on Baltar. He was free to come and go, within limits, but privacy was denied him. He was to be available for interrogation at any moment, and security forces had the run of his spaces.

So did Kiera.

She had been here numerous times in the weeks just prior, and did not even think to knock. The door opened easily at her touch.

"Baltar?" she asked. "Baltar? Is all well?" Silence answered her, and only darkness met her eyes, so total and complete that she wondered if something had gone wrong with the enviro-systems. There should have been *some* ambient illumination, spilled from timepieces or instruments or even the TransVid display. There was none now, however. Baltar's quarters were blacker even than the void between the stars.

"Baltar?" she asked, tentatively, suddenly frightened. She wasn't alone here, she knew. Even without a response, she could feel another presence in the room.

Or presences.

Now she heard something, but only faintly, as if sounding across an infinite distance. A syllable or two spoken in a familiar voice, but muffled, as if the darkness that had swallowed up all of the light now was trying to take the sound, as well.

"Baltar?" Kiera forced back a desire to turn and run. "Baltar! Answer me!"

The darkness changed. Black, impenetrable, it seemed like a material thing now. Impossibly, it seemed to Kiera that she could see it writhe and twist and flow in unrecognizable patterns, like a sea filled only with black water. Kiera felt the chill caress of a cold wind, much too cold for the *Galactica's* controlled environment. She heard a whispering gasp, a sound like a liquid chuckle that rang in her ears, and then the darkness rushed past her.

Past her? To where? Kiera did not care, so long as it went. Suddenly, more than anything else in all the worlds, she wanted to see the darkness end.

Her wish was granted, then.

Kiera blinked her eyes, rubbed them in disbelief. The laughter-like sound had faded and the strange darkness was gone, so completely that she could almost wonder if they had ever been there at all, or if they had been a trick of her own stressed senses. The residence was still dim and shadowed, but it was a more natural kind of murkiness that greeted her now, not the strange, pervasive blackness. Enough ambient light broke the shadows that she could see Baltar, seated on his lounge, now rising to greet her.

"Oh, Kiera," Baltar said, his voice filled with sorrow. "I've just received word. We're at war again. Isn't it dreadful? Will our poor people never know lasting peace?"

Aske's odd, shuffling gait had become more clumsy, and his pace had grown slower. It was obvious that he had run farther, faster than he was accustomed to. Apollo felt sorry for him, but other matters demanded more of his attention.

Sheba was showing signs of fatigue, too. That wasn't surprising. According to her brief recounting, her Chitain captors had allowed her no more than starvation fare. Those sparse provisions, coupled with her injuries and harsh, physical interrogation at the hands of Tcharken and whatever horrid creature he had terrorized her with, had sapped Sheba's strength and endurance. Apollo and Gar'Tokk took turns lending her some support as they made their way down one passage after another, but she was wearing down fast.

As they walked, Apollo told her a bit about the current situation on Poseidon, and all that her father, Cain, had accomplished there.

"So much, in so short a time," Sheba said, obviously having a hard time processing all the status changes that had occurred during her captivity.

Apollo nodded. “He’s driven,” he said. “Driven to destroy the Cylons, and driven to do whatever it will take to enable him to destroy the Cylons.”

“I can think of less laudable goals,” Sheba said.

“It’s not the end I argue with,” Apollo said, irritated. “It’s the means. President Cain has endangered the people he’s sworn to protect, and blinded himself to the presence of another menace. He’s tried to ally himself with the very people who have tortured and imprisoned his own daughter!”

“He *couldn’t* know that,” Sheba said hotly, sudden anger giving her new energy.

“Yes, he should have suspected,” Apollo said sadly. “But he simply couldn’t imagine that he might be wrong. It’s his flaw, Sheba; I just hope it’s not a fatal one, for him or for our people.”

They moved along in silence then, and nearly a centari passed before Apollo spoke again, this time to their guide.

“Aske, are you certain this is the way? We’ve come so far…” Aske nodded. *” Starlight”* he said. “Aske take you to where *Starlight is*.”

“These tunnels look strange,” Sheba said. “Not like the others.” Her words held truth. Aske had led them now into a down-sloping corridor, ceilings high enough to accommodate a Chitain warrior, but only barely. The walls were plain, undecorated stone, and so was the floor.

“Old part of city,” Aske said. “No one come here any more. Not since others come. Only Aske.”

“Others?” Apollo asked. He trusted Aske’s intent, but not the humanoid’s ability to reason clearly, or present all the facts when they were needed. This wasn’t the first time that Aske had invoked “the others,” and the casual comment sent twinges of concern racing through Apollo’s mind.

If Aske heard the question, he did not answer it. He took another ragged gasp and kept shuffling forward. “Here,” he said, turning another corner. “Here. Like Aske promised. Here is *Starlight*.” The corridor broadened then, and the roof rose. Aske’s voice took on a hollow, echoing quality as he limped into the vaulted space beyond. Apollo and his companions followed.

Apollo gasped, both at the horror of his sudden understanding at who the “others” were, and at the sight of the two figures who seemed almost to be waiting for them within that huge chamber.

“Lords of Kobol,” Apollo said softly.

“Not the way I would put it,” Starbuck drawled from somewhere inside the chamber. “But the feelings are the same.” He turned to face Boomer.

“Do you want to brief him, or shall I?”

Athena.

Apollo reached out with his mind, drawing on every erg of energy he had to send the name outward, out into the void. Here, aboard the *Starlight* hangared in an installation that was so obviously a product of Cylon technology, the mental “static” that had plagued him since coming to this world seemed somehow less overwhelming.

Apollo prayed that the interference had abated enough for his message to get through. This was the only hope he had to communicate with the *Galactica*. The Cylon fortress was securely insulated against all commlink frequencies; even if it had not been, he would not want this warning intercepted.

Athena, he called again. *Please, hear me*!

He could hear Boomer and Starbuck, conversing in hushed tones, heard their words without caring much what they said.

“…get out of here, fast,” Starbuck said.

“The *Starlight’s* ready to launch,” Boomer responded. “We can scramble on a moment’s notice. But we’ve got to do something about this place.”

“We can do something about it from orbit,” Starbuck urged. “We stay here, we’re sure to be discovered.”

The two men were debating what to do next. Flee the Chitain homeworld now, or attempt to sabotage the installation before launching the *Starlight!* The latter option appealed more to Apollo, but he did not voice his views. Instead, he set forth another mental probe, fueled as much by desperation as by discipline.

Athena! Terrible danger! You must warn the fleet, warn Cain, warn the others, he implored. *The Cylons are here and they are in alliance with the Chitain*!

Somewhere to Apollo’s left, Sheba half-sat, half-lay on the tiled floor, a sidearm laser in one hand and she watched carefully for intruders. They had tended to her wounds as best they could, and now she was resting. He could feel her gaze upon him, sense her curiosity about what he was doing, or trying to do, but he had no time to explain now.

Athena! He made the name a plea, a cry of warning. *Please, hear me*!

Apollo!

It was a mental whisper, a hint of a reply, a barely discernible shadow of a response. Apollo seized on it, embraced it, rejoiced in the knowledge that

his warning had been heard.

The Cylons are here, he repeated. *They are working with the Chitain*!

Cylons? The mental whisper came again, more clearly this time. Clearly enough that he could tell it was not Athena who heard him. It was another mental voice that rang in his mind now, too faint for conclusive identification, but he could tell that it did not belong to his sister. Despite that, he still thought he knew it. The mental whisper, fading again now, was naggingly familiar. Apollo had known this mind before. He reached out again, trying to seize the psychic trace and follow it back to its source. Who was it that had heard him? Whose thoughts sounded in his mind?

"Apollo!" Sheba shrieked from the *Starlight's* entryway, where she stood guard. "Starbuck! Boomer! Battle stations everyone! Now!" Apollo blinked in shock, his near-trance state broken. Reality snapped back into focus. Reflexively, he reached for the replacement sidearm he had commandeered from the *Starlight's* lockers. Before he could draw it, however, Sheba had fired her own—fired it at the first of a dozen gleaming metal forms that suddenly stood framed in an open doorway. The blast connected, but the Cylon Centurion that was its target scarcely seemed to notice. Laser energy splashed against its armored skin, scarcely less red than the crimson of its optical scanner.

"I rest my case," Starbuck snapped as he ran to Sheba's side. And then he began firing, too.

The Cylons advanced.

Chapter Fourteen

APOLLO! THE SKY HAVE ARRIVED!

Clad in new armor, Valor rode the astral winds, slicing across the heavens like the whisper of a killing blade. And he was not alone. With him were more than one hundred and fifty Sky warriors, each encased within his own armor, each a weapon unto themselves.

Apollo?

Valor had sensed his friend's mind, but now there was nothing. He hoped that Apollo would be all right. Sky healers had done their best for Valor and then tried to force him to stay behind as their attack force had departed the homeworld to bring vengeance upon the Chitain. Despite his weakness, Valor would not hear of it. He had traveled almost unconscious, healing as he moved through space.

Now his hatred and fury drove him on, regardless of his pain and discomfort.

He had been stunned to discover the human fleet under attack by the Chitain. The battle was fierce, but there was no question in Valor's mind where the Sky would enter the battle. He had little experience with humans, but if Apollo was an example of their intelligence and courage and compassion…well, the Sky already knew full well how the Chitain behaved.

Valor's senses felt the minds and the crafts of all the combatants. The humans were brave but frenzied, the Chitain cold and callous. They were confident of their superior firepower, and rightly so. Even as the Sky entered the battle, Valor could sense the deathcries of several human warriors. The Chitain craft, as he had already experienced firsthand, were deadly fast.

Attack! Valor gave the command, allowing his emotions to flow with the order. *Destroy the Chitain with all the savagery with which they wiped our embassy from the galaxy*.

And his orders were followed. Like silver scythes, the armored Sky warriors cut across the vacuum of space. The element of surprise worked well in their favor. The Chitain were concentrated on the human vessels, and at first strike, the Sky destroyed six Chitain craft completely. But surprise was a one-time advantage, and the Chitain ships were too fast, their weapons too precise, for the Sky to avoid them for long. Valor slid out of the path of a barrage of red energy blasts from a Chitain ship's stinger. First two, then three other Sky warriors fell under the barrage, exploding into space debris.

More reasons the Chitain must be destroyed, Valor thought. Directly ahead, a Chitain craft closed on one of the human starships. Valor dipped and set a course straight for the barbarians' ship. Its long front tendrils, which powered the Chitain vessel, burned brighter as it picked up speed. And the scarlet-glowing tail that hung beneath the ship began to move. The Chitain piloting the craft must have determined Valor to be the greater threat, because the stinger whipped around to aim directly at him.

With a thought, Valor knifed up through the vacuum of space. A scarlet blaze of energy passed just beneath him, and before the Chitain could fire again, Valor was positioned just above the ship. And that was the Chitain's one weakness when it came to battling the Sky: their vessels were faster than anything Valor had ever seen, but this wasn't a race. His own armorship might not be able to outrun a Chitain warship, but the Sky could maneuver at the warhawk speed of thought.

This battle was far from over.

"What in the name of God are those?" Cain thundered, staring at the viewports and flatscreens where the battle unfolded before them. "We have *another* alien race to contend with here?" Athena stared at the new arrivals, the crescent-moon-shaped ships that had appeared suddenly as if from nowhere. She opened her mouth to respond, to tell Cain that she had no idea what they could be, but she was glad they seemed to be there to help. The words were about to come out, and then…something…touched her mind.

"They're friends," she said wonderingly, recalling suddenly her brother's story about meeting the alien warrior he called Valor some months ago.

"Trust me, Cain. They're definitely friends."

"I hope you're…" Cain began, but his words trailed off as he stared at the battle in progress.

The Sky were friends indeed. And suddenly, a battle that had seemed almost hopeless was changed completely. All along, the Chitain had seemed to have superior weaponry but far inferior skills as warriors. Only a few centari earlier, all of that had changed. The Chitain had, almost as one, turned from prey to predator. As she had begun to suspect, it seemed the savage race had been merely baiting them, using their own warrior pilots as sacrifices in order to better understand the enemy. And once the Chitain had turned, once they had begun their new onslaught, once they had brought up nearly twenty new warcraft to supplement their remaining forces…well, it really didn't look like the human race had any chance at all.

Yet now, just as swiftly as their fortunes had changed less than a quarter of a centon before, the astral winds of fortune shifted once again. The Sky had arrived.

Behind Athena, Cain began barking orders over the commlink to his command staff on the *Pegasus*. Athena did nothing. Her own crew knew well enough just from observing that the new arrivals were to be treated as allies. Any fool watching the battle knew that.

With most of the fleet already to relative safety, the four battlestars had been able to bring most of their massive firepower to bear. But as the Chitain received reinforcements from their world below, even that had not seemed to give the Colonial fleet an edge.

This was different, however. And completely unexpected.

"Omega," she said softly, and yet even in the chaos every crewman could hear her voice. "How many of the newcomers are there?"

"One hundred forty seven," Omega replied instantly. Then amended,

"one hundred forty five."

Athena nodded grimly. A lot of warriors would lose their lives today. Human. Sky. Chitain. But there was nothing to be done for it except to pray that when the battle was over there was still a Colonial fleet left for Apollo and Cain to fight over.

Jolly was sweating something awful. It wasn't the climate inside his Viper, though. No, the little lines of perspiration that ran along his forehead inside his helm were produced by pure, unadulterated terror. But Lieutenant Jolly wasn't afraid for himself. That was the strange thing. He had never been particularly brave or courageous, no more so than any other Viper pilot. But at this moment, he felt that the fleet itself was closer to total

destruction, that humanity was nearer its own, true apocalypse than it had ever been.

Jolly had never been a man who thought overly much about

consequences. But after almost dying once today—having had to dump his own shattered Viper for an unfamiliar replacement—after having Ensign Marcellus blasted to oblivion only centari after the same young man had saved his life—well, this day was different. As he closed on a Chitain craft that was otherwise engaged by a pair of Sky warriors, and blinked sweat away from his eyes, Jolly thought about what was at stake in this battle, about how important his own actions were at that moment.

No anxiety. No trepidation. No fear. Not for himself. At that moment, the only thing in his mind was the battle.

He gripped the navi-hilt with power and purpose, and he fired on the Chitain craft with fury in his heart. The Chitain shields were strong, but Jolly had a long approach vector on his enemy, and he followed through on a pursuit arc long enough to get in three separate turbolaser strikes. The third burned right through the Chitain warship, and the craft shattered in a thunderclap of flame and debris. One of the Sky warriors, the *silverwings*, Jolly thought of them, turned off on another vector. The other was not as fortunate. The Chitain had done enough damage to cripple the Sky ship, and even now it came under Chitain fire again and was destroyed.

His scanners and the info-scroll on the inside of his helm fed Jolly continuous data on the battle. Vipers whipped by his canopy, as did the Sky craft. He had already realized that flying above the Chitain was the best chance at avoiding their weapons, but even that was not foolproof. Explosions to all sides, seemingly endless, and one word resonated in Jolly’s mind.

Massacre.

Not merely that the Chitain were massacring them, but that the death toll from this battle on all sides was going to be unthinkable. Horrible. He set off after the Chitain warship that had just shot down a Sky warrior. Another Viper was approaching at a perpendicular vector. The Chitain ship’s stinger whipped around and aimed at the other Viper, and Jolly cringed.

“Take ‘em down, Jolly!” a female voice shouted.

The Viper let loose with a turbolaser volley that struck the Chitain craft, but did not destroy it. Even as Jolly loosed a blast from his own turbolasers,

the Chitain returned fire on the other Viper and it exploded, blinding him for a moment.

His target blossomed into a fireball in front of him, and his Viper rocked as he passed quickly through the debris.

Jolly swore loudly. He had destroyed the Chitain craft, but too late to save her. Too late to save Captain Hecate, a Warrior he had known for many yahren. A woman he had greatly respected.

Jolly's heart went cold.

"Jolly!" Athena's voice crackled on the commlink. "Was that…?"

"Yes!" he snapped.

"You're the ranking officer still in this battle, Jolly," Athena told him, her voice sad yet hard. "You've got tactical command."

"God help us all," he whispered. But not loud enough for Athena to hear. Maybe, he thought, not even loud enough for God to hear.

"Lucifer, your report," the Imperious Leader demanded.

"By your command," Lucifer said sweetly, glowing domed head bowed to his master.

"We are within range of narrow-vector sub-space communication with our outpost on the Chitain homeworld," he replied. "Our outriders reported a short time ago that the human fleet had entered the Chitain system. Now it appears that there is a space battle between the humans and the Chitain. The Centurions at our outpost will be launching Raiders to come to the Chitain's aid within a centari."

The Imperious Leader nodded silently, as if none of this information was news to him. What infuriated Lucifer was that he suspected that was precisely the truth. Somehow, the Leader had known all of this already. It was connected, he believed, to the weird ripple of shadows he had seen on his last visit to the Imperious Leader's chambers. But he did not yet know how.

"In addition, Imperious Leader, there seems to be another race involved in this conflict…"

The Leader's scaly head tilted slightly, and he glared down at Lucifer from his High Seat of Command. Lucifer offered what passed for his smile in return. *Ah*, he thought, 50 *there* are *things you do not know*.

"What is this race?" the Imperious Leader demanded.

"Thus far unknown, master," Lucifer replied. "The Chitain have not provided us with any information on these others. We may only know what

the Centurion captain at our outpost there has reported. It seems that…well, it seems as though the Chitain are keeping something from us." The Imperious Leader nodded. "They have their own agenda," he explained. "Their alliance with us is one of strategy and survival for their race. Perhaps I have underestimated their capacity to fear the Cylons. Perhaps they will require a demonstration of our superiority."

"Perhaps," Lucifer said quietly.

"You may go, Lucifer," the Imperious Leader said. "Bring me news when you have it. And make all speed to the Xerik system. We will rid ourselves of the human vermin once and for all, and we will bring our new

'allies' to heel as well."

"By your command," Lucifer replied.

As he left the command chamber, Lucifer's curiosity raged, but there was nothing to be done for it. He had hoped that his observation of the Imperious Leader might lead to the revelation of secrets. Answers. Yet thus far, he had only given himself more questions.

But Lucifer did not give up easily.

"Watch it, Troy!" Dalton roared over Duet's internal commlink. "I don't think we can take another hit like that!"

"I'm doing my best," Troy snapped, and wished he hadn't. She'd know that, of course. In fact, it was the reason they'd suddenly split their duties. He was piloting the Duet alone now, completely in control of the ship's movements. Dalton's attentions were solely and completely on the weapons systems. It had to be that way. There were just too many variables to contend with now.

The alien craft—Athena had called them the "Sky" over the comm—were on their side. And there were dozens of them. But the Chitain had received many reinforcements from below that had now joined the battle.

It had been several centari since new Chitain craft had been launched, however. Maybe, if they were lucky, the Chitain were running out of laser fodder.

Laser fodder? Perhaps not that. For these warriors were fast and fierce, savage in their approach. The combination of that speed and savagery, plus the clutter of the conflict, forced Troy into a command decision. He would fly, Dalton would fight—each of them doing what they did best. And so far, it was working.

The Duet dipped, tracking a pair of Chitain craft that were themselves already on the trail of half a dozen Sky vessels. Even before Troy could cry an instruction, to Dalton, she had already begun to fire. The Duet let loose with a barrage from both attached Vipers, all turbolasers firing at once. In microns, the two Chitain attackers were destroyed.

Troy rocked forward in the cockpit of the Duet, navi-hilt jarring in his hand for a moment before he gripped it more tightly and pulled it under control.

"What the frack…?"

"Turn the audio back up on your scanners," Dalton chided him. "We had a Chitain on our tail."

Troy's eyes widened. There were so many threats so close at hand that the scanners were driving him insane, and he'd turned the audio down on them. Now he turned it back up, no matter how annoying.

Dalton had used the rear turbolasers mounted to the connecting module between the Vipers' bellies to take out their pursuer. If she hadn't acted quickly enough…

"We'd better end this thing, and soon," Troy said. "It's chaos out here."

"Only one way to do that, lover," Dalton replied, and Troy blinked at the word. "We keep killing them until we've got a clear starfield." On that note, the Duet began to erupt with turbolaser fire again. Another Chitain craft exploded, and Troy set his jaw, his mouth a grim line. She was right. There was only one way to end this: fast, and without mercy.

At the very moment he had that thought, Troy's scanners squealed with alarm, then blossomed into holo-display of a pair of Chitain warships closing on the Duet.

"Troy!" Dalton cried.

"I see them!" he replied over the commlink.

"I don't know if I can get them both!" she shouted.

"This is Lieutenant Troy. We've got a pair of mugjapes on our tail and can't shake 'em!" Troy said over the fleet commlink. "We could use a little assistance here!"

"This is Jolly," a comforting voice replied. "I've got your…" Then the Chitain fired. Defensive shields held, and then evaporated. One of the Chitain scored a direct hit on the connecting module between the Vipers—most of which consisted of a huge fuel tank.

The module exploded.

Troy’s head hit the canopy, his eyes closed a moment, and when they opened, he was out of control, his Viper spinning as it knifed through the heart of the battle. Smoke rose from his instrument panel, klaxons blaring and alarm lights blinking red and yellow.

“By the Lords,” he croaked, even as he reached out to manually deactivate all non-essential systems.

He grabbed the navi-hilt just in time to veer away from a collision with the *Pegasus*. Then he remembered to breathe again. And once he knew his lungs were working, once he knew that he was still in the fight, he realized what had happened. The blast had blown the two Vipers apart. No more Duet, at least not at the moment.

Troy’s heart froze.

“Dalton?” he said over the commlink.

“Dalton?” he shouted, panic growing within. But Dalton did not respond.

Dalton’s pulsars were melted to slag.

She could fire her turbolasers, but she couldn’t maneuver. She had support vapors working, so she wasn’t going to suffocate or freeze to death in the cockpit of her own starfighter, but since the Viper was adrift and its weapons could be fired but not aimed, support vapors weren’t going to do her much good.

Dalton’s commlink crackled but the voices of the fleet were gone. No communication at all now.

Alone in the middle of a war, she was about to die.

When her scanners picked up the Chitain vessel bearing down on her, klaxons blaring at her to *do something* she only shook her head sadly. She might have laughed if it weren’t for the terror that boiled inside her. If it weren’t for the pain of knowing that, just when her life had finally begun to be what she’d always prayed it would be, it was going to be over.

“God, Troy,” she whispered.

The Chitain was just off to starboard and on a heading straight toward her. The stinger that hung beneath the ship glowed a dark, bloody red. Its first blast ripped across the vacuum of space and tore into the Viper’s wing, nearly shearing it off. The klaxons inside were deafening. Dalton bit her lip…

…and the Chitain warship exploded.

Dalton blinked back the glare of the flash, and saw the Viper pass dangerously close to her cockpit. The internal illumination was out, except for the flashing warning lights inside, but it had to be Troy. Somehow, she knew it was him.

But that was only one Chitain ship. She was still a helpless target. Even now, her scanners were warning her again.

A sudden loud clank made her shriek, and Dalton turned to stare out the canopy, uncomprehending, at the silver metal sheath that seemed to cover one side of the Viper. Another impact from the opposite side rocked her ship, and Dalton glanced frantically through the front of the canopy, the only view still available to her.

Her Viper started to move, even as she realized that these things clamped to her starfighter were a pair of the armored wings that had joined the battle a short time ago. The Sky.

As she stared out the canopy, the *Pegasus* came into view. Dalton's breath caught in her throat and she felt tears begin to well up in her eyes—tears she would fight back down, of course. The Sky had rescued her and were shuttling her damaged craft to the nearest battlestar and out of this insane fight.

She wanted to feel regret, anger that she had to be taken out of the battle. She thought she should be impatient, itching to land and get into the first available fighter. But Dalton didn't feel any of those things. Of course she would rejoin the battle if there was a ship available. But for the moment, all she could feel was relief.

And in the silence of her damaged Viper, Dalton said a small prayer of thanks to the Lords of Kobol, to God, to whomever was looking out for her. Troy she would thank later, in person.

Chapter Fifteen

STARBUCK'S SECOND LASER BURST did no more good than had his first, but the next had some effect, however indirect. As the Cylons entered, he had been standing in the open, well away from any cover. Now, as they advanced, he retreated, hugging the protective shadows cast by heavy equipment and docked spacecraft. As he rounded a fuel processor assembly and scrambled for the next patch of shelter, he snapped off a quick laser blast at a tylium conduit that led from the assembly to a nearby fueling bay. The laser beam sheared easily through the flexible casing, and a severed length of the segmented hose swung free, dragged down by a heavy fitting at one end.

It was that fitting that smashed squarely into the thorax of one Cylon and set it tumbling back into its fellow Centurions. It also created enough of a distraction that Starbuck could make his way unmolested to a Cylon Raider, whose armored bulk could shield him from the Centurions'

light-arms fire.

The Cylon installation beneath the sands of the Chitain homeworld was a noisy outpost of hell now, its air heavy with the searing crackle of laser fire and the electric stink of the molten metal that the blasts created when they found their targets. More Centurions had emerged from shadowed archways, their advance scarcely slowed by the steady barrage that Apollo and his comrades unleashed in their direction. The initial arrivals had more than equaled, in numbers and firepower,

Apollo and his companions. The almost immediate reinforcement made the odds even worse.

Nearly hopeless.

"Termination is inevitable!" droned one Centurion, its soulless, synthesized voice loud enough to be heard even over the sounds of battle.

"Surrender, intruders!"

"Not an option I would take," Starbuck called out, loud enough to be heard. He had taken refuge behind the landing gear of a Black Raider. Now, he was working his way toward the *Starlight* by running from one patch of cover to another.

He aimed and fired again at the Centurion that had spoken. This time, either luck or skill guided his shot. The laser fire found the humanoid creature's most vulnerable point, the wide, narrow lens that served as its eyes, and, even better, found the blood-red scanning receptor that moved back and forth behind the lens. With gratifying abruptness, the lens shattered and the scanner exploded. The Cylon's head erupted in a shower of sparks and the thing's body toppled forward.

"We're not giving up," Apollo snapped, "There's too much at stake! The fleet, the *Galactica*, Poseidon…" He fired, and cursed as it glanced off his target's body armor. The Centurion rocked back for a moment, staggered by the blast but undamaged by it, then lumbered forward again. It raised its own blaster as it came forward, then fired, swinging the weapon in a tight arc. Pulsed laser bursts dug into the tiled floor, blasting out a successive series of craters that came closer and closer to where Apollo was standing.

No time to take aim now, only time to dodge. Apollo ducked and ran, heading desperately for the *Starlight's* armored bulk. The concussive bursts from the Cylon's weapon came closer, then fell further behind and Apollo twisted and turned. The Centurions were little more than base-model units, hardly better than drones. They were ill equipped to follow or anticipate the random movements of a desperate human who was undertaking evasive maneuvers. Cylons, even true Cylons, had bred much of the organic perspective out of their kind. Most of them had only a machine's love of straight lines and mathematically defined curves. Even working with that disadvantage, however, the Cylon was doing a good job of cutting off Apollo's line of escape.

"Apollo!" Boomer yelled, from somewhere to Apollo's left. "Over here! I'll cover you!"

More laser bursts, more explosions. A chip of tile, blasted free by the lead Cylon's rifle bursts, found Apollo's left cheek. It cut and burned him. He winced and spun, following the sound of Boomer's voice, but instead of refuge, he found something else.

One of the closely spaced pits in the tiled floor caught the heel of Apollo's right boot, caught it and held. His ankle twisted and gave, and then he fell to the debris-strewn floor. Armored footsteps came closer and Apollo raised his weapon and fired.

To no effect.

“Apollo!” Sheba’s voice shrieked, echoing in the vaulted chamber as the Cylon came closer. She could see his situation, but could do nothing about it; she was also pinned down by Cylon weapons fire.

Something else echoed, louder than her desperate words—a thundering howl that sounded as if it came from the throats of beast and man simultaneously. Savage animal fury and human rage mingled in that howl, a sound like no other.

It was the howl of Gar’Tokk, the former leader of the Borellian Nomen, and Apollo’s sworn protector.

The Noman did not run onto the field of battle. Rather, he seemed to *surge* onto it, moving with a primal, liquid grace that was as far from Apollo’s stumbling run as *that* was from the Cylons’ mechanical gait. More than two metrons of muscle and bone, armed only with the double-headed spear he had taken from the Chitain, Gar’tokk thundered into the midst of the Cylons. His lips had drawn back to reveal strong, white teeth clenched in a savage grin, and his eyes were lit with the full fury of a race that had recognized its animal roots and embraced them.

Gar’Tokk was a purely atavistic form, primal nature at its most brutal, and yet put into the full service of a human intellect. The Cylons, end products of countless generations of gene-splicing experiments and cybernetic implants, obviously had no idea what to make of him. He was the physical essence of everything they abhorred. For a fraction of a micron, they paused in their fire.

Apollo cried out, “Gar’Tokk! You can’t!”

But Gar’Tokk could. Shielding the man he had sworn his life to protect, the Borellian did the unbelievable. He brought the heel of his free hand up, fast and hard, and smashed it into the lower edge of the one Centurion’s face plate, striking the low-set ridge of metal that served the creature as a jaw. Impossibly, the blow made itself felt, and stopped the Cylon’s advance. Equally impossibly, the Centurion’s head snapped up and back, bending into an twisted arc as Noman muscles pitted themselves against a cold-forged saligium exoskeleton.

Muscle won.

With a shriek that combined the sounds of breaking metal with those of electronically voiced agony, the Centurion’s neck shattered. More metal tore as outer plating followed suit. Convulsing as it died, the Cylon dropped its weapon. Reflexively, Apollo caught it. The other Cylons scarcely

seemed to notice. They were obviously far more concerned with Gar'Tokk at the moment, and with good reason.

More bolts of red energy spat in the Noman's direction now. Most he dodged, twisting and turning his heavily muscled form with a serpentine grace as he anticipated his attackers' mechanistic onslaught. Twice, he did not move fast enough, and twice, searing beams found him. One burst merely sliced a lock from his coifed mane, but the second needle-sharp beam burned through the bulging bicep of his left arm. Gar'Tokk did not seem to feel it. Certainly, he was not slowed, but only howled again in renewed fury.

Gar'Tokk's left hand still held the battleaxe he had commandeered from the Chitain. He spun it now, grasped its shaft with his right hands as well, then drew back and struck with it. He swung the curved blade forward, finding, in quick succession, the throat of one advancing Cylon and the thorax of another. The bladed weapon was as impressive as its wielder. Apparently, the Chitain were master metalworkers, even if they made little use of the stuff in day-to-day life. Whatever the composition of the axe's leading edge, it was keen enough to slice gashes deep into Cylon armor when driven by Gar'Tokk's muscles.

Apollo struck now, too. The Cylon laser rifle he held was more powerful than his own sidearm, but it worked in much the same way. He chose a target and fired. One of the two damaged Cylons fell, and then the second. Gar'Tokk swung his axe again, more to threaten than to damage, and then reached down and scooped up Apollo with his injured arm. Apollo made no protest as his self-appointed bodyguard lifted him, as effortless as he might lift a child; he knew that Gar'Tokk was beyond hearing such things now, and would ignore them, in any case.

Instead, he said only, "Let's get out of here!"

In instant response, the Borellian Noman sprang, leaping above and beyond the armored figures that surrounded them, and then galloped towards the impounded battle cruiser. More laser fire followed them, and Apollo thought that at least one, perhaps several of the blasts, grazed Gar'Tokk, and made the Borellian grunt in discomfort, it not pain. They were never enough to stop him, or even to slow him in his headlong rush to sanctuary. Through it all, and without any apparent effort, he held Apollo in the protective shelter of his own body.

Only one Cylon now stood between Gar'Tokk and the *Starlight*, and it did not stand long. One final leap carried the Borellian above it, and one final swing of his war axe shattered the Centurion's cranium. Even as the Cylon fell, however, it fired its laser rifle one last time, a single burst of energy that struck Gar'Tokk's shoulder. Then, sheltered now by the warship's armored hull, Gar'Tokk clambered inside set down his charge with surprising gentleness.

"You're wounded," Apollo said. The muscle and flesh of the Noman's shoulder were seared and blackened.

Gar'Tokk made no response, but slumped silently in one corner. The others were waiting for them. Starbuck and Boomer both crouched just inside the hatch, weapons at the ready. Even as Gar'Tokk had set down his precious burden, both Boomer and Starbuck fired laser bolt after laser bolt at the advancing Cylons. More Centurions had joined the squad now, more than enough to make up for the ones that had fallen, and it seemed like every bit of open space in the launch installation was occupied by silver-armored boots. Apollo spun and joined his comrade in firing upon their attackers.

"Sheba!" Boomer shouted into his commlink. "They're on board!

Shields up!"

Apollo glanced at him. "You can't be intending to—"

"No choice," Starbuck said, as a stray bolt from a Cylon rifle raced paced him and seared a black mark on the supporting bulkhead. A vibration swept through the *Starlight*, and a humming noise, so low that it was felt more than heard, made itself known.

Outside the *Starlight*, another Cylon raised his rifle, fired. This time, the energy splashed harmlessly against the *Starlight's* shields, which were more than tough enough to withstand such small-arms fire.

"That won't hold them long," Starbuck said, apprehension mingling with marginal relief in his voice.

He was right. The Cylons had assessed the situation and were acting upon it. Three Centurions trained their lasers on a single point of the energized shields, and then a fourth and fifth joined them. The intersecting beams made a light to bright too be looked at, and the view through the open hatch rippled and wavered as the stressed shield began to give.

Starbuck slapped a switch, and muttered a curse as the hatch began to close. At this range, for this kind of assault, armor was a better barrier than

energy—at least, temporarily.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Starbuck said urgently. Apollo nodded. “Secure yourselves,” he said, scrambling to reach the ship’s bridge. “I’ll do what I can to speed things along.” The *Starlight* was a four-man warship, but two could run it comfortably. Sheba was already seated in the command chair when Apollo threw himself into the weaponry station. She was wearing a pilot’s helm, already energized.

“Cycling the engines now,” she said crisply. “We’ll be ready in a centari.”

“This is crazy,” Apollo said, without waiting for explanation. He already knew Sheba’s intent, even without using his heightened sensitivities. Instead, he called upon a different kind of intuition, forged from both long combat experience and deep emotional intimacy. He knew what she intended to do, and knew that it was incredibly dangerous.

“Crazy, but our only chance,” Sheba said, a lethal calm in her voice.

“The reinforcements just arrived.”

Apollo was wearing his own helm now, and gazed out through its energized visor at the scene outside the ship. The Cylon Centurions, numbering at least fifty now, had been joined by a squad of Chitain warriors. Apparently, the natives had set aside their fondness for physical confrontation and had resorted to energy weapons instead. Dozens of laser beams converged on the *Starlight* as the combined hostile forces sought to make the protective shields fail.

“This is a sweet ship,” Sheba said, “But it can’t stand up to numbers like these for long. Nothing can.”

“Nothing has to,” Apollo said grimly. He pressed an override switch and brought the *Starlight’s* turbolasers on line. They were intended only for off-planet use, and the computer sang a warning cry of protest, but he ignored it and gripped the weapon controls. A targeting frame appeared in his field of view, but he ignored it.

At this range, in these confines, pinpoint accuracy would not matter. Apollo thumbed the turbolaser controls. There was a sound like thunder as the *Starlight’s* fore cannons fired. Twin bursts of superheated plasma burned into the assembled Cylon and Chitain horde. When the glare of the barrage faded and Apollo could see again, fewer than half the enemy remained standing.

No; not just standing, but still advancing. They came forward with the maniacal fury of an army that knows its cause is lost, but needs to wage war nonetheless. With no other choice, Apollo fired on them again.

"Ready," Sheba said crisply, unmoved by the carnage she had just witnessed. She wrapped both hands around the navi-hilt and pressed more switches.

The *Starlight's* tylium engines came to life, and the spaceship twitched, shifted, tried to rise. More Cylons and more Chitain died as the pulsars' incandescent exhaust roared through the cavern's enclosed confines.

"Apollo!" Sheba screamed, strident urgency in her voice. He didn't answer. Instead, he yanked back on the weapon controls. The targeting frame shifted, and imposed itself on the cavernous roof's blast doors. Apollo studied them carefully. He would have only one chance.

"Apollo," Sheba said, "we have to go. This is an unstable situation! There are other ships here, fuel reserves…"

Apollo took a deep breath and concentrated. Hitting the wrong target would be as dangerous as not firing at all. A miss could fail to destroy the blast doors, and bring the heavy slabs down on them, instead. He forced himself to ignore the chaos outside, ignore the shipboard computer's warning calls, ignore everything but the roof's angle and the blast doors' mechanism.

The *Starlight* shifted again, then did more than shift. It had never been meant to hover. Now, it trembled and shook, and sought to rise.

"Losing equilibrium," Sheba said, through clenched teeth. *Now*, something at the back of Apollo's mind seemed to say. *There*!

He fired, full power this time, and felt a rush of relief as the sliding blast doors vanished in a cloud of slag and vaporized alloy. An unobstructed view of Xerik-7's night sky replaced them. As eagerly as a daggit slipped free of its leash, the *Starlight* rushed upward. Almost instantly, it passed through the sundered barrier and threw itself starward.

"Rear scanners," Apollo ordered the ship computer. The main viewscreen lit with the image of the buried installation, or what was left of it. Even as the image snapped into view, it vanished, replaced by a searing flash of light that made Apollo's eyes burn and water, despite the scanners' safety filters.

"Gone," he said softly. Despite himself, despite the implacable enmity between human and Cylon, and the obvious savagery of the Chitain race, he

felt a twinge of sorrow to see so many lives end.

“Unstable situation,” Sheba said, her voice now drained of emotion.

“Our thrusters must have detonated their tylium reserves. That fire should burn for a while. Just thank Kobol it happened after we got out, not before.” She brightened then and managed a grin, suddenly looking much like her father. “That will teach them to take Colonial Warriors captive!” Behind them, a second wave of explosions seemed to emphasize her words. A chain reaction had begun in the hidden Cylon base, as more and more fuel reserves ignited and exploded. In microns, the devastation found the underground tunnels and followed them back to the Chitain citadels. As Apollo watched, the strange spires began to burn, and then, as if in slow motion, to fall.

“You sound like your father,” Apollo said, the tension of the moment giving way to a vague, unfocused anger. Earlier, before the Cylon attack, he had explained to Sheba about the *Galactica’s* encounter with Cain, and about her father’s current status.

“Thank you,” Sheba said grimly. “He has the right idea. Blast the Cylons into powder, and take their allies with them.”

“Your father,” Apollo said, “hates the Cylons so much that he’s blinded himself to all other threats. You *father* wanted peace with the Chitain, no matter what the cost.”

Sheba glared at him. She was obviously running on adrenaline now, kept functioning by a heady mix of human fury and warrior discipline.

“How *dare* you,” she said angrily. “From what you’ve told me, my father has done more with the *Pegasus* than you or Adama ever did with the *Galactica*. He’s found a new world, and done much to make it safe for his people. You’re supposed to be a warrior, Apollo.

Maybe it’s time you learned that there’s a time to quit running.” Apollo stared at her, shocked. “Your father,” he said, “was so eager to make war with the Cylons that he was willing to ally himself with your captors! Look at yourself, Sheba.” He reached out, indicated her wounds.

“Look at what your father’s friends have done to you.” She slapped his hand away. “I can’t believe what you’re saying,” she hissed. “If my father allied himself with the Chitain, he had good reason!

He would never abandon me! He couldn’t have known…”

“I hate to interrupt,” Starbuck’s familiar voice drawled, “but we’ve got enough hostiles already. We don’t need any more in our own ranks.” He had

joined them in the cockpit and was gazing at a viewscreen.

"Stay out of this, Starbuck," Sheba said levelly. Already, however, the fury in her voice had abated, either because she had reconsidered her words or from exhaustion. "This is between Apollo and me." Starbuck shook his head. "Maybe so, but it can wait," he said, and pointed at the viewscreen. "We've got other problems." On the screen was another warship, but not one like any of them had seen before. It was enormous, easily the size of the Chitain capital city, and clearly built for destruction.

"Well, at least now we know what they were building in that installation," Starbuck said sourly. "They must have launched before we found the place. Anyone care to guess what they'll do with it?"

"The fleet," Apollo said softly. "We've got to alert the fleet!" The bridge on the *Galactica* was a bustling maelstrom of activity, scarcely less hectic than the war that raged in the surrounding fleet. The viewscreens were alive with tactical displays and status reports, and it seemed to Athena that every commlink connection brought news of another casualty. The combined force of Apollo's and Cain's fleets, the joint effort by all available military vessels, and particularly the starfighters from the *Galactica*, the *New Bellephon*, the *Daedelus*, and the *Pegasus* were still winning their engagements, but just barely. The opposing forces were closely balanced, and Athena could not drive from her mind the impression that the Chitain were holding back, waiting for something.

Waiting for what?

Certainly, the enemy forces had suffered considerable casualties, but they had also bought much strategic knowledge of their human foes, how they fought and what their capabilities were. They might think the knowledge was well worth the price they had paid. Their homeworld was in the same system, after all, and reinforcements might well be at hand. *Athena!*

Apollo's mental voice sounded in her mind, and Athena felt as if the weight of an entire world had been lifted from her shoulders. Maddening questions about her bother's safety had never been far from her mind, and it was with sincere relief that she responded to his call. *Apollo*, she said. *Oh, Apollo, you're alive! Where are you? We've been so worried! I was beginning to think that you—*

I haven't been able to reach you, came the reply. *Something about the Chitain homeworld, or the Chitain themselves, blocks mental transmissions.*

They took us prisoner—

We're at war with them now, Athena interrupted grimly. *Cain's forces and ours are making headway, but the Chitain are tenacious. Athena, you've got to prepare*, Apollo said urgently. *Cain should hear this, too. The Starlight has vid-comm; hold on—*

"Colonel Athena!" Omega snapped from across the bridge. "We're receiving a communication from Commander Apollo aboard the *Starlight!*

The crew of the Galactica's bridge gave a brief cheer as Apollo's face flickered into life on the large screen.

"Thank the Lords!" Commander Cain grumbled as he stepped up next to Athena, his presence imposing. "Apollo—what's going on out there, boy?"

Athena flinched at the tone of Cain's voice, demanding an answer as though from some shavetail subordinate. She watched her brother's face on the comm screen, but Apollo remained calm…for now. Athena knew her brother well enough to realize he'd noted Cain's condescension, and if it continued he'd call the older man on it, whether this were a private conversation or fed through to the entire fleet.

"I greet you with good news and bad," Apollo said grimly. "The good news is that Major Sheba is injured, but alive and with our party, which has remained intact. Have a med-team ready to assist her when we reach the battlestar."

"Sheba! A-alive…" Cain stammered.

"So what's the bad news, Apollo?" Athena asked before Cain could assert himself again. "We can't handle much more in the way of trouble than we already have."

"I know, and I'm sorry to say that things are going to get a lot worse, and quickly," Apollo said grimly. "Chitain reinforcements are on the way. But the worst part of it is that we've discovered a Cylon base on Xerik-7!"

"That's preposterous!" Cain said, exploding with disbelief. "I would have known of a Cylon presence in my own back—"

"Commander!" Apollo interrupted. "I saw them—they almost killed us all. They're working with the Chitain, supplying them with technology, firepower. At least one Chitain dreadnought is headed your way. Maybe more."

"Lords…the colonists," Athena said softly. Now she understood the strategy the Chitain has used—a conflict intended to occupy the fleet's

forces and draw protective cover from the planet's civilian population. She voiced her suspicion. "If the Cylons are involved, the colonists may well be their true target."

Cain blanched. "That's absurd," he said, but without much conviction.

"More than that," Apollo continued, urgency in his voice. "There's something wrong with Poseidon itself. We found genetically mutated descendants of the planet's previous human population. The Chitain use them as slaves! But it wasn't the aliens who did this—some aspect of Poseidon's environment causes a genetic breakdown in humans over the generations."

That was more than enough for Athena. "Omega!" she snapped.

"Scramble all available QSE-equipped vessels. I want an immediate evacuation of all Poseidon colonists. Forcibly, if necessary."

"Colonel Athena!" Cain thundered, his face a mask of dark rage. He turned to face the screen, to confront Apollo. "Commander Apollo. I have complete authority over Poseidon and all of its colonists. Your *subordinates*," he spat out the word, "have no right, no power to issue such a command!"

Athena kept silent, waiting for Apollo's response.

"Colonel Athena," Apollo said evenly, "this is a direct order." The bridge was quiet, all eyes glued to the comm screen. "Evacuate Poseidon immediately," he continued. "By force, if necessary. Arrest any residents who resist. Put them in protective custody. We have no time for questions or explanations. Now, scramble!"

Cain stormed forward, purple with rage. "Belay that order!" he commanded. "I am Poseidon's president. And the commander of the Pegasus's forces—not to mention two other battlestars and a half-dozen more warships! You'd be dying out here without my help! How dare you? You have no authority—"

"Commander Cain," Apollo began.

Athena cut him off, rounding on Cain, unable to contain her own anger any longer.

"Listen to me, you old fool! Poseidon is poisoned. The planet is long-term uninhabitable. But that's irrelevant—you couldn't stay if the planet were a bloody paradise! Apollo has reported the presence of Cylons on the planet! And you can bet there's likely many more of them on the way!"

“Cain,” Apollo said, his face grim, his tone threatening. “We’re in no condition to fight the war you’ve been fantasizing about all these yahren. I’ll take any measure necessary to protect humanity from the Cylons. You’ve risked the lives of all of your people pursuing a ill-chosen alliance with the Chitain, and all along they’ve been working secretly with the Cylons!”

“They’ve played you for a fool!” Athena shouted.

“That’s enough of that, *Colonel*,” Cain snarled without taking his attention from Apollo.

“You listen to me, Apollo,” Cain said. “I was commanding a fleet before you were born. You are not aboard this vessel. Until you return, *I* am the ranking authority!”

“I’m the commander of the *Galactica* and its entire fleet,” Apollo said.

“You’re standing on *my* bridge. If you’re looking for a fight, I suggest taking it to the Cylons and your new friends, the Chitain.” With a dismissive air, Apollo now turned his attention to his sister. “Colonel Athena, if Commander Cain tries to interfere with our efforts to protect ourselves, arrest him and hold him in a detention cell!” With that, Apollo broke communication and the screen went blank. Cain turned and stared at Athena, but she spoke before he could. “Shut up, Commander. Another word and I *will* have you arrested. Perhaps you don’t care about saving your colonists, but the fleet is at risk as well. If you won’t help, stay out of my way.”

Cain, goaded beyond reason, raised one hand to strike her—

Athena struck first.

Bridge personnel looked up in shock from their workstations as their beloved acting commander slapped the legendary Cain, open-palmed, across the face, hard enough to make him stumble backwards. Cain glared at her, his hands balling into fists and his face blanched with rage. Athena stared at him as she spoke, but her words were meant for all within earshot. “We don’t have time for this feldergarb,” she said, making rare use of coarse language. ” *You’ve* brought us to this sorry pass, and now you’re trying to keep me from getting us out of it! If you want to fight, fight the Chitain and the Cylons. Otherwise, get the frack out of my way!” After a long moment, Cain gathered himself together and stood.

“We’ll speak of this later,” he said grimly. “But in one thing, at least, you’re right. We’ve got a war to win.”

The *Starlight* had scarcely come to a halt when Apollo bounded down the gangplank and into the *Galactica's* main launch bay. All around him, Vipers and other warships came and went. Medical personnel saw to the needs of injured Warriors and service technicians made what repairs they could to vessels damaged by Chitain fire. Apollo was conferring with a master mechanic when a familiar voice called his name.

"Apollo!" Jolly bellowed. "You're back! I thought for sure those mugjapes would never let you go!"

"We're all back," Apollo said, sincerely cheered by the presence of his old friend. "Including Sheba."

"Sheba?" Jolly looked past Apollo, at the team of medics who where even now taking the injured major from the *Starlight*. Her adrenaline rush had faded less than halfway back to the *Galactica*, and she looked pale and weak. Gar'Tokk lumbered behind the medical team, a freshly applied wrapping on his injured shoulder. The big Noman had been injured more severely than Apollo had realized at first, and had taken aid only on his strictest orders.

"The Chitain had her," Apollo said to Jolly. That was as much explanation as he felt like offering at the moment. The events of the past days, the words he and Sheba had spoken to one another—they were a whirlpool of confused feelings that he could not process at the moment.

"I—I understand," said Jolly, who obviously did not. From across the launch bay, a technician yelled, "Ready to launch, Lieutenant!" He gestured at a waiting Viper. "Repairs are complete!"

"That's my ship," Jolly said, turning to go.

"No, it's not," Apollo said grimly. "I haven't come this far to watch someone else fight."

"But—"

"No protests, Jolly," Apollo said.

"I'm not protesting," Jolly said, a broad smile splitting his round features as he clapped a hand on Apollo's shoulder. "But there are plenty of ships available. One of the advantages of allying ourselves with Cain's forces is that he's built himself a sweet little fleet, and put it at our disposal!"

"Good."

"The only problem is, the craft aren't QSE-equipped, and most of the ones that are have been detailed to evacuation duty," Jolly said. "Word is

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“Word is, we can expect a Cylon initiative at any moment,” Apollo said,

“and they’ll likely strike at the unprotected civilian population. We’ve fought them without QSE before, and we can do it again.”

“Cylons?” Jolly said, stunned by the bad news.

“They’re working with the Chitain,” Apollo said. “Now, see about getting Vipers for me, Starbuck, and Boomer. There’s a war to win.” Tigh strode purposefully down the corridor toward Baltar’s quarters. He held his head high and kept his jaw set in a tight line. He did not like what he knew he was about to do.

It had been one thing when they were offering Baltar his life in exchange for cooperation. This was different. This time, Tigh would be asking for Baltar’s aid from a position of weakness.

President Tigh felt as though he might vomit.

His heels clacked on the floor, throwing hollow echoes along the corridor. It was quiet in this area of the *Galactica*. Anyone who might serve some function was already deployed elsewhere, trying to deal with the conflict with the Chitain. And now it had grown worse. Now the Cylons were coming.

At Baltar’s door, Tigh considered knocking. It would have been the diplomatic thing to do. He had, after all, come for Baltar’s help. But time was of the essence, and equivocation was not to be allowed, not for a moment. No, he wanted Baltar off guard, wanted him alarmed. Tigh put his hand on the scanner plate outside Baltar’s door. The door slid aside, and Tigh strode into the room, prepared to threaten Baltar’s life, to go back on his own word, if necessary. Whatever it took. Tigh’s mouth was open to speak, but now his jaw dropped even lower. On a long thick-cushioned chair, Baltar and Siress Kiera sat together, his hands in her hair, their lips locked in a hungry kiss.

“By the Lords!” Tigh shouted.

Kiera flushed scarlet as she looked up at him. Baltar’s eyes flashed with rage, then settled back down into the cool blue of amusement.

“President Tigh!” Kiera roared. “What is the meaning of this intrusion? How dare you…”

Tigh felt his temple begin to throb. He leaned in quickly, held a finger up in front of Kiera.

“Not another word, Siress. I am fully empowered to enter the living area of any prisoner on this fleet, and make no mistake about it, Baltar is a prisoner!” Tigh snapped.

“It’s only fair for me to tell you, Kiera, that I will be reporting this to the Council and requesting your immediate dismissal from the Quorum,” he told her firmly.

Baltar chuckled softly.

“No,” the Great Traitor said. “No, you won’t do that at all, Mr. President.”

Tigh glared at him. “Who are you to tell me what to do, you monster?” Any trace of amusement disappeared from Baltar’s face. “You came here for my help, did you not, Tigh?” Baltar asked. “The Cylons are on their way, and poor you, you don’t know what to do. Because even if you leave now, even if you use full speed, you know they’ll probably be able to track you. Or at least, they’ll have a better idea of the direction in which you’re traveling. If you could destroy them, you’d have a chance again at putting the Cylon conflict behind you. But you’re in no shape to defend yourselves.

“You need me, President Tigh. You can threaten me with execution, but until you’ve reached safety, we both know you won’t go through with it. You need me,” Baltar said happily.

Tigh was speechless. He stood a little straighter, let out a long breath, and for a moment, couldn’t think of any response. Finally, his eyes narrowed.

“How?” he asked.

“How do I know?” Baltar replied. “I have my sources.” Perhaps it was the tiny grin which accompanied those words. Or perhaps the tone in the Traitor’s voice. It might have been nothing more than Tigh’s disgust at finding Siress Kiera with the greatest criminal humanity had ever known, or simply his fear for the fleet, his horror at the knowledge that with every micron, more Warriors were dying. Tigh snapped.

He reached down, lifted Baltar by the fabric of his tunic, and gave him a bony backhand across the face. The Traitor’s lip split, blood flew from Baltar’s nose, but he didn’t make a sound. Tigh stared at the man, at the damage he had done.

Then he struck Baltar again, knuckles striking cheekbone with a crack. Kiera was shouting, almost screaming at him, pulling at Tigh’s right arm.

The president of the Quorum shoved Baltar to the floor. Baltar was grinning boldly. “You’re dead,” the Traitor said. “You’re all dead now.”

Tigh glared at him.

“When this is over, I’ll see you again,” Tigh promised. He looked forward to it.

Apollo held his breath for several microns as his newly acquired Viper rocketed out through one of the *Galactica’s* launch tubes. He knew that Starbuck and Boomer would be beside him a heartbeat after he’d entered the fray. When the three starfighters burst from the battlestar, Apollo surveyed the battlefield. It always looked different when you were in it—when your life depended on every micron’s decision—than it did on a scanner.

Things did not look good, but they weren’t as bad as he’d thought. With Valor leading the Sky warriors into the battle against the Chitain, the odds had grown decidedly better. In fact, Apollo thought that, if they could find some way to destroy the huge Chitain dreadnought that even now was moving into the battle, they might actually save the majority of the fleet. Humanity would live to see the sun rise over another planet, a new home, one day.

At least, that’s what he was thinking…when the battlestar *New Bellephon* exploded.

Chapter Sixteen

APOLLO PRAYED TO THE SPIRIT OF HIS FATHER, to the Lords of Kobol, and to a God he'd never needed more than at this very moment. He stared out through the canopy of his Viper at the huge Chitain ship, easily twice the size of a battlestar. Its spires jutted from the topside, and its entire circumference was surrounded with propulsory tentacles. From its belly hung a trio of long stingers whose glowing crimson tips whipped from side to side, burning the opposition in quick bursts of energy, leaving behind only lingering scars of the face of the universe.

"Tell me you have a plan, Apollo!" came Starbuck's strident voice over the commlink. He didn't sound amused. "Frack! Rotten mugjapes…" Captain Starbuck's words trailed off as he dodged an attack by one of the Chitain warships. There weren't many left. In fact, they'd have had it won already if it weren't for the mammoth craft that had shaken itself loose from the sands of the Chitain homeworld.

Apollo sighed. There was only one thing they could do.

"Blue and Red Squadrons, form on Major Boomer and Captain Starbuck and keep those warships off us," he ordered. "The rest of you, stick with me."

"We're with you, Apollo," came Lieutenant Jolly's voice over the comm.

"I've got your back, Commander," Ensign Dalton added.

"You have your orders, Warriors," Apollo snapped. "Follow them." Athena's voice slipped softly into his brain. *What are you planning, Apollo*?

A little suicide run, he replied. *But if we time this right, maybe I won't actually succeed in getting myself and the sixteen other Vipers I've got with me, destroyed*.

Just tell me what you want to do, Commander.

Cain stomped into the *Galactica's* launch bay, grim and determined. The area was disturbingly quiet, completely empty of Vipers. Across the long bay, however, there were three interfleet shuttles that could still be flown. Usually, one of these required two pilots, but Cain could fly a landram across the stars and still be the best pilot in the celestial sea. He started across the bay, but stopped and turned slowly when he heard shouting and

heavy footfalls behind him. A pair of Council Security officers, clothed all in black, hustled up and moved around to block his progress.

“Sorry, Commander,” the tall woman said, glancing at her squat Cancerian male partner. “You’ll have to stop right there.” Disgust boiled up inside Cain, dwarfing his anger, which was quite a feat considered the enormity of his rage. The old man stood to his full height, blue eyes flashing, and stared at the tall woman with every ounce of withering superiority he could muster.

“I don’t believe you know who you’re talking to, Officer,” Cain sneered.

“Now stand down, or I swear by the Lords of Kobol, I’ll break you into pieces they won’t even be able to find.”

The blackshirt looked stunned, stared down at the floor of the bay, but the woman yet stood her ground.

“I’m…I’m sorry, Commander, but we have our orders. You’re not to leave the *Galactica*.”

Cain stepped in close to the woman, prepared to physically remove her from his path if necessary.

“On whose authority do you dare to stand in my way?” he demanded.

“On mine!”

The voice came from behind him. Cain froze, and all the color from his face. He turned slowly, eyes downcast. He wanted to swallow, but found his mouth too dry.

She stood just inside the launch bay, unsteady on her feet. Her wounds were bandaged but still oozing. Her face was ghostly pale. Next to her, Cassiopeia glared furiously at Cain, but kept silent.

In that moment, Cain hated her.—For it was she who had brought Sheba down here.

“You shouldn’t be up,” he told his daughter. “You…you were unconscious.”

Sheba pushed away from Cassiopeia, stumbled forward a step, and looked at her father with such dismay, anger, and disgust, that the old Warrior stopped breathing for a moment.

“I shouldn’t be up,” she agreed. “But I had to come down and see if it was really true. To see if my father…to see if the man I thought was dead for nearly twenty years was going to leave me behind; leave me without ever having let me see his face again.”

“I have my duty, Sheba,” he said weakly. “You know that.” Now she pulled herself up, wincing with the pain of her wounds, and stared straight into her father’s eyes. When she rose her hand to slap him, she was slow and her muscles weak. He could easily have stopped her. He didn’t.

“How dare you?” she said, her voice choking now with tears she would not allow herself to cry. “We *all* have our duty, Father. You taught me that. But you have always gone far above and beyond the call of duty, haven’t you? You’ve been trying to throw your life away since before I was born. I don’t know what it is about you. But I do know this:

“You will not fly off to certain death, again, Father. In the past, I’ll grant you, you have done valiant and courageous and extraordinary things. But if you take one of those shuttles, you would surely die before reaching the *Pegasus*. And even if you made it, all you would do is sacrifice your entire crew along with your own life. That wouldn’t be courageous—only bova-headedly stubborn.

“I know you, Father. You want to die a hero. If you do this, you’ll just die an old fool.”

Cain swallowed dryly, slowly reached up to cup his daughter’s chin in his hands. To caress Sheba’s cheek. When she came into his embrace, it was more of a physical collapse than a gesture of love. Still, he held her tight as she began to weep.

“I thought you were dead,” he whispered, his eyes closed tightly.

“Then we’re even,” she replied.

“We’ve got to do *something,’”* he told her.

“All that can be done is being done,” Cassiopeia said, the first time she had spoken since she had arrived with Sheba.

Cain looked up at her again, and this time, whatever anger he had felt for her was gone. He held two fingers to his lips and blew Cassie a tiny kiss above his daughter’s head. Sheba couldn’t see him, but somehow, Cain didn’t think she would mind.

“We stand together now, Father,” Sheba said. “From now on, this fleet stands or falls, lives or dies, together.”

Cain turned slowly, continuing to support his daughter, and glanced out the launch aperture where he could just see the edge of the huge Chitain mother ship under attack by the combined human and Sky forces. His military senses told him that the *Galactica* was moving into position for a

full assault on the Chitain war-giant. With the weapons systems of the Chitain race, Cain didn't think they had any chance at all.

"May the Lords watch over us all," he whispered. "I hope Apollo and Athena know what they're doing."

Starbuck gripped the stub of an old fumarello between his teeth, but he'd forgotten it was even there. He had given himself over completely to the feel of the navi-hilt in his hands, to the scanners flashing and sensors blaring, to the chatter of the commlink in his ear. For all intents and purposes, the man called Captain Starbuck was gone. The lover, the jester, the gambler, the boon companion…they were all gone.

Only the Warrior remained.

The Chitain craft were faster than a Viper.

That didn't mean they had better pilots.

Crimson energy flashed past Starbuck's left wing from behind, the navi-hilt flowed right in his hands and he was on a collision course with another Chitain ship, whose stinger was even now turning to fire upon him. Starbuck shoved the navi-hilt forward into a ninety-degree dive. A" double flash of crimson energy, and the two Chitain craft—one pursuing him and the other he'd had in his sights—destroyed one another. Starbuck whooped loudly.

"Rack 'em up and knock 'em down!" he roared.

"Would that be in reference to women, your pyramid opponents, or your enemies?" Boomer asked over the comm.

Starbuck laughed. "Well, my daughter is listening, so I'd have to say—" he began.

Only to be interrupted by Dalton. "All three, Dad, and you know it!" she said.

"Now we know where you got it from," Troy added, and Starbuck heard much laughter on the comm in response.

They were winning. Lives had been lost, and none of them had forgotten that. Friends had died. Lovers had died. Warriors had died. But this was vengeance and it was righteous and it was the only way they knew to properly honor their dead.

He watched as a trio of Sky vessels, one of them leaking green viscous fluid through a crack in its hull, closed on a Chitain craft and utterly obliterated it.

Yeah. They were winning.

But it was all going to be for nothing if Apollo didn’t do his job. Apollo had been distressed at having to send his closest friends and most trusted Warriors off to guard his flank. But he needed them there. Keeping the Chitain busy while he worked on his scheme to defeat the aliens once and for all was vital. But it also meant that his own impromptu squadron was now made up of a group of Warriors he did not know well. He was familiar with their strengths, but only from the viewpoint of their Commander, not in any more intimate sense.

His concerns were only aggravated by the knowledge that he was currently flanked by Cato and Freyja, Warriors who, mere centons ago, were still Academy cadets. The best currently in the program, but cadets even so. Neither of them had ever actually launched a Viper before, never mind been in the middle of a pitched space battle.

All things considered, they were performing admirably. They were, after all, still alive. But that gave Apollo the added burden of their lives. For what he now had in mind, they might as well all have targets painted on the wings of their Vipers.

It wasn’t fair, really. Apollo knew that, for him at least, it would not be the end. For the rest of the Warriors, he had no such certainty. He dwelled on the horror of that for a moment as his Viper knifed through space, coming down from directly above the massive Chitain dreadnought. Small lights burned on the top of the ship, and energy blasts crackled through empty space and dissipated off the Viper’s shields. As he’d suspected, these were not their primary weapons.

“Stick close to the enemy!” he shouted over the comm. Apollo turned his ship in and skimmed along the top of the ship, in and around the many jutting spires. One of the huge stingers from under the ship loomed straight ahead, bobbing in space, trying to get a clear shot at the Vipers. But the Colonial fighters were like skreeters on the back of a bova. If you shoot the annoying insects, you kill the animal.

“This is Commander Apollo,” he said over the commlink. “I’m going to give a direct order now. It may be the single most important order any of you will ever receive.

“Stay with me. Fire your weapons. But do not worry about hitting the enemy. Stay alive, that is your primary function. We need pilots, not heroes. Take evasive maneuvers, drop out of the battle if that’s your only option. But stay alive!”

Without waiting to hear the reaction of his squadron, Apollo tapped his navi-hilt to the right, and then he was at the edge of the huge ship. The Viper passed almost too close, and Cato and Freyja imitated the move as they followed him.

Frack, they were good.

Apollo!

A voice in his head, and it wasn't Athena's.

Valor! he thought happily. *We owe your our lives, my friend. My life was already yours, Apollo. But we are not here for you, that is merely good fortune. We are here for vengeance! I see the plan in your mind. Do you think it will work?*

Apollo considered Valor's question, but only for a moment. *We'll know in a few microns*, he replied.

The Sky are with you, my friend.

Apollo did not reply this time. His mind was elsewhere. He threw the navi-hilt to one side, flipping the Viper over one hundred and eighty degrees. Behind him, Cato and Freyja, and then the thirteen—now ten, he noted somberly—other Vipers in his wake all followed suit.

"Attack!" he snapped. The commlink carried his order to the others, and the turbolasers of the entire motley squadron erupted in a fusillade of destructive force.

They were beneath the Chitain dreadnought. Directly ahead of them were the three enormous tails, or stingers, which hung down from the belly of the massive mechanical beast. Those crimson-glowing weapons were flashing death and destruction across the astral winds, and if the fleet had any hope of surviving, they had to be destroyed.

"Stay close to the belly of the ship!" Apollo reminded the pilots who followed him. He tried to send the same thoughts to the armor-clad Sky warriors who flew in their wake, and hoped they understood. Then it was chaos, and in the confusion Apollo had to focus on his primary goal, and on his own survival. The stingers whipped about before them, each as wide across as a Viper was long. The Colonial Warriors fired, laser blasts arcing across space, sparking against the outer shell of the huge stingers—but doing little in the way of damage. The silverwing Sky craft zipped in and out of the waving tendrils, several crashing against the thick stingers, with little result.

"Frack," Apollo whispered to himself.

But he wasn’t too upset. He had, in fact, assumed that the stingers would be well shielded. And it wasn’t going to be easy to hit them in the same spot more than once.

The Vipers kept to the underside of the dreadnought as best they could, but there were thirteen of them, and at least half again that many Sky warriors. The Chitain ship was enormous, but that left very little room for maneuverability. Apollo was the first to break away, not merely to give his squadron more breathing space, but because the stingers were not reacting as he had hoped. Whoever or whatever manned the enormous vessel’s weapons, the stingers were not being brought to bear on the squadron. The Chitain obviously didn’t want to take the chance that they might destroy their own ship in the process.

The situation demanded a bit more close-quarters flying. Apollo needed to annoy them even more than he already had.

His Scarlet Viper dipped, and he flew directly between the lower ends of the stinger appendages. One of them whipped up immediately and fired on him, but the crimson energy blast went well wide of his starfighter. Then Apollo was out of that forest of weapons, pulling up and coming around for another pass.

As he approached again, he could see the Sky warriors attacking the dreadnought’s stingers, several of them obliterated even as he watched. By then, the rest of Apollo’s squadron had followed his lead. They were diving and firing, weaving amongst the wildly waving stingers of the Chitain dreadnought, harrying the enemy’s weapons like a pack of lupuses bringing down a frightened bova. They were doing exactly what had to be done.

Sacrifice, he thought, and he winced as he saw a red beam arc from one of the stingers and a Viper explode in a flash of smoke and shrapnel. Apollo cursed loudly in the cockpit of his Viper, felt the inquisitive probing of two minds, his sister’s and Valor’s, and pushed them both away. Now wasn’t the time.

A long stinger tendril whipped suddenly to one side, shattering a Viper into pieces of debris. Apollo looked away. If the pilot had survived only to be torn apart by the vacuum of space, he didn’t want to see it. It would only distract him from…

“Cato!” he heard someone shout on the commlink.

An instant later, as another Viper was burned from the cosmos by a Chitain blast, Apollo recognized the voice. Cadet…no, Ensign Freyja,

which meant the exploding Viper would have been Cato. Three of them had come out to battle, three students, not more than children. Only Freyja yet lived. Suddenly, Apollo was determined that, if nothing else, her life would not join the others for whose loss he already felt the burden.

“Now!” he shouted into the commlink.

Now! he screamed with his mind.

“Five microns, then go!” he ordered his squadron, hoping Valor would pass the same message along to the Sky, though he counted only seven Sky ships remaining.

“One!”

Inside Apollo’s Viper, klaxons blared angrily.

“Two!”

He stared down at his scanners to see what new threat the noise represented.

“Three!” he barked.

The Chitain must have been on to them, somehow. For his scanners showed one of their warships, the mustache like propulsion tendrils flat back and rocketing the ship toward Apollo’s flank. Its lone stinger hung beneath it, aimed right at him.

“Four!”

It was approaching from behind. There was nothing he could do to protect himself.

“Five!” he roared. ” *Go! Go! Go*!” The rest of the squadron turned off, pulsars flaring blue-white as they shot away from the Chitain dreadnought as far as their Vipers would fly. Apollo didn’t bother. The Chitain had him dead to rights, its stinger glowing, ready to fire.

“Omega, fire at will!” Athena said sternly.

The order went out to the *Pegasus* and the three surviving battle cruisers that Cain had built, the *Starlight* among them. When Apollo had given the order, they had all moved in as quickly as possible. While the Chitain dreadnought’s weapons were functional, the Colonial battlestars and cruisers could not get close enough to strike a decisive blow. But now, with the Commander and his squadron baiting the Chitain weapons systems, keeping them occupied with a threat close at hand, the Colonial warships had moved in swiftly, instantly.

As one, every armed vessel in the fleet fired upon the dreadnought. It’s extraordinary shields held up for several microns, then there was a breach—

Apollo was thrown forward against his restraint harness as an explosion behind him added momentum to his pulsars. The Viper shot out from under the Chitain dreadnought even as Apollo reoriented himself and checked his scanners.

The explosion had not come from the dreadnought. Rather, the Chitain fighter that had been about to fire on Apollo…was gone.

“Hey, Apollo!” a familiar voice barked over the commlink. “If you’re through playing around out here, I’ve got a tankard of grog back in the aft ODOC with my name on it!”

Apollo grinned. Starbuck, of course.

A micron later, before he could even respond, the Colonial fire on the Chitain dreadnought widened the breach in its shields and began penetrating the warship’s outer hull. Apollo checked his scanners. He didn’t have Starbuck on visual, but he knew his friend must be…

“Starbuck!” he roared. “Get out of there now! Get out from under that ship!”

Apollo’s shouted command was cut off by the roar of the dreadnought exploding. The massive ship went up in a trio of thunderous concussions. Once more Apollo was thrown forward, his Viper slewing to one side in space, though he had not touched the navi-hilt. For a half a micron, an eternity to Apollo, all systems aboard his Scarlet Viper winked out. He had a moment to wonder how long his helm could keep him alive. Then the power returned, backup tylium processors kicking in, and he breathed a sigh of relief—grateful to be breathing at all.

“Starbuck!”

Apollo shouted his best friend’s name several more times, his knuckles white where they gripped the navi-hilt. There were no other Vipers nearby. No Sky warriors either. He understood instantly that the Sky had not bothered to retreat. They had not even tried. Valor had said they were on a mission of vengeance, and Apollo understood that now more than ever.

Valor! he thought, sending the name out into the ether. Out onto the cold astral winds.

There was no response.

Valor was no more.

Then he had Starbuck’s Viper on visual. Through his canopy, Apollo could see the ship, dark and drifting. Its hull was nearly black, one wing completely melted by the explosion.

When Apollo said Starbuck's name again, it was in a whisper.

"Apollo?" Athena's voice came over the comm.

She didn't need to ask the question as she felt Apollo's pain deepen.

"Father?" Dalton's voice came over the comm.

Long silence.

Then, a groan.

Apollo raised his eyebrows, his Viper gliding closer to Starbuck's ruined starfighter.

"Don't worry, honey," came Starbuck's hoarse, croaking voice. "Try as he might, Apollo hasn't been able to get me killed just yet…on the other hand, this Viper's in pretty bad…"

The words ended there…and the shouting began. At Athena's quickly barked instructions, the *Starlight* moved in on Starbuck's damaged Viper and managed to synch-lock to its canopy. The canopy was blown off and Starbuck hauled up into the battle cruiser. The ruined Viper would be hauled back to the *Galactica* to see if anything could be salvaged. There were only a handful of Chitain craft left in the fight. With the remaining Sky warriors and the Vipers still flying, the Chitain were soundly defeated.

Apollo hurried back to the *Galactica* as quickly as he could, an unspoken prayer always on his lips. But he did not need to speak the words. The Lords of Kobol heard his thoughts, he was sure. He only wished they would respond.

On the *Galactica's* bridge, Athena took a long, deep breath. It was the only way she could keep from shouting. Instead, she spoke in a quietly controlled tone that would brook no argument, would allow no ear to turn from her voice.

"All hands, attention," she said, knowing that the entire fleet was listening on unicomm. It was as she had ordered. The fleet had a right to know.

She watched their eyes. Omega. Tigh. Plutarch, who had made himself and his brilliance available to them for every micron. Without him, they would probably all have died by now.

And there, by the entrance to the bridge, Commander Cain, hand in hand with the injured Sheba.

"We have succeeded in evacuating most of the citizens of Poseidon," she announced. "Some have determined to stay, despite warnings from myself and from their president, Commander Cain, about the enemies they

will face and the long-term effects of exposure to the Poseidon atmosphere. We have decided to respect their wishes." She glanced at Cain, who nodded for her to continue. Athena saw the old man squeeze Sheba's shoulder, and she felt heartened. Perhaps he had finally seen enough of war and death.

"The last ship off Poseidon is departing now," she continued. "The last of our Vipers are returning to our two battlestars. The entire fleet…" she paused, lowered her head and sighed before meeting the watchful gaze of humanity once more. "What remains of the fleet is either already equipped with QSE technology, or slave-waked to a vessel that is. All except for the *Pegasus*, the *Daedelus* and the three Poseidon-built battle-cruisers that survived our battle against the Chitain.

"You must be wondering why this is important," Athena said gently.

"We have been aware for some time now that there are Cylons en route to our position at this time. We have a centon, no more, before they arrive. Already they have us on long-range scanners. There are at least three base-stars coming. We are in no condition to survive a protracted battle—any battle at all, really—with the Cylons at this time. QSE is our only hope for an escape route they won't be able to trace." *I hope,* Athena thought, but did not give voice to her doubt.

"Colonel Athena," Cain interrupted loudly.

She turned to face him.

"Pardon me," he continued. "But you don't have the time to waste waiting to see if the *Pegasus* and her sister ships can be outfitted with this new technology or slaved to other ships. I'll leave for the *Pegasus* now. There's no reason for all of us to…"

Athena saw the pain in Sheba's eyes before the other woman looked away.

"Commander Cain, with all due respect, sir, you and your people and your ships are too valuable for us to lose without a fight," Athena said.

"We're not going to leave you or anybody else behind if we don't have to. If the QSE cloaking works for the whole fleet, we should be out of here with time to spare, and we'll be able to track any Cylon QSE-equipped Raiders that might try to follow.

"Sit tight, Commander. You're a courageous man, but there are times when prudence is more valuable than courage."

Cain bristled, seemed about to offer some sharp retort in anger for the way Athena had spoken to him. Not that she had been disrespectful, but that

she had presumed to offer him advice.

Surprisingly, the old man nodded after glancing once again at his daughter. Sheba smiled.

“That is all,” Athena said.

At her signal, the unicomm signal was cut off. She moved swiftly then toward the door. Tigh, Cain, and Sheba fell in behind her.

“Omega, you and Plutarch make sure we can take Commander Cain’s ships with us when we go. If not, make a plan for their evacuation, but don’t institute anything without Commander Cain’s approval. Using the holomap, triangulate the locations of the two nearest ancient colonies, then plot us a course between them. Keep our options open.” She glanced at Tigh as she stormed through the open door.

“Now,” she said, “let’s find out who is still alive around here.” Apollo looked up as Athena entered, and smiled weakly. “How are they?” Athena asked. Apollo glanced down at the med-berths where both Gar’Tokk and the scorched Starbuck lay unconscious. He raised his eyebrows and looked speculatively at Cassiopeia, who was running a green-glowing hand-scanner over Starbuck’s head.

“Cassie?” Athena asked.

Cassiopeia clicked the scanner off and looked up. She glanced at Apollo, and then back at Athena.

“Gar’Tokk is going to be fine,” she said. “His wounds were grievous. If Apollo hadn’t gotten him here when he did…but he did. A few centons, and he’ll come around. I’m going to do a bio-plasteen patch on his abdomen, and he’ll be out of action for a few days. But he’ll be fine.” Her last words trailed off. Apollo didn’t have to ask what her hesitation meant.

But Athena, apparently, couldn’t help herself.

“Starbuck?” she asked.

“Cassie’s just finished telling me that the surface damage won’t be a problem,” Apollo reported. “It’ll take a while, but there won’t be any scars.”

Athena frowned. “The bad news,” she demanded.

Apollo and Cassiopeia exchanged looks.

“He’s suffered massive cranial trauma,” Apollo explained, repeating words he’d heard Cassie speak only moments earlier.

The commander of the Colonial fleet glanced up to see Tigh, Cain and Sheba standing just outside the med-lab door.

“He also was deprived of oxygen for some time,” Apollo went on.

“There’s no way to tell how long, or if it was…if it was *too* long. You’d better get Dalton up here. And Boomer as well.”

His voice cracked. He couldn’t go on.

“They’re on their way,” President Tigh explained. “Along with Troy. Apollo—the Chitain have been defeated. And according to Plutarch’s latest estimate, we will be able to bring Cain’s people and his warships with us under QSE cloak. We’ve…won.”

Tigh faltered on that final word. Apollo wanted to reply. He glanced at Tigh, at Cain, at Sheba, with whom he had so much to discuss. He looked at Cassiopeia, and finally at his sister. He stepped forward, entwined his fingers in her hair and kissed her gently on the forehead. Then he went to where Starbuck lay, his uniform burned, almost melted to his body, his skin cracked and blackened. If it weren’t for the soft hum of machines and the gentle rise and fall of his friend’s chest, Apollo would have thought Starbuck nothing but a corpse.

A real corpse. For as far as Apollo knew, what awaited Starbuck when he left this world was an endless void. If he was not a full-blooded Kobollian, he would not be accelerated, not called to join the Lords of Kobol aboard one of the Ships of Light.

There seemed something horribly cruel about that. And brutally unfair as well. Suddenly, for the first time since his father had told him the truth about his heritage and the Lords of Kobol, Apollo began to wonder if the acceleration of the spirit of pureblooded Kobollians was even logical. Why the exclusion of those not directly descended from the Lords of Kobol? Whether direct or not, the populations from the Twelve Colonies had all been descended from the planet Kobol. Perhaps the Lords’ direct descendants were more advanced in some way…but did that necessarily mean this it was impossible for other humans to achieve that level of advancement?

The concept of selective acceleration made little sense to Apollo. At best it was illogical, At worst, elitist. And now, looking down at Starbuck, Apollo determined to pursue the idea further. Perhaps one day all of humanity would be able to expand their minds to prepare for the acceleration of their spirits at the end of corporeal life. It was certainly something to think about.

He bent and kissed the charred, flaking cheek of a man who was closer to him than any brother could have been, closer than his own brother had ever been.

“Strange,” Apollo said, his voice choked with emotion. “This doesn’t feel much like victory.”

Epilogue

APOLLO sat alone in his father's sanctuary aboard the Battlestar *Galactica*. The Cylons were far behind them, and no QSE pursuit had been detected. They had, it seemed, made good their escape. The next colony indicated on the ancient holomap was in a system that Colonial astronomers had named Kirasolia, millennia ago.

Now it was their destination.

Apollo sat still in his father's chair. The weight of command had never fallen more heavily on his shoulders. Starbuck's condition had not improved, but nor had it worsened. Gar'Tokk was once more acting as his bodyguard, but the Noman had become quieter than ever. Something about his performance on the Chitain homeworld seemed to bother Gar'Tokk, but Apollo could not determine what that might be. Without Gar'Tokk, none of them would have survived the Chitain's duplicity. They had gained the military genius of Commander Cain, but Apollo thought that in the bargain he had probably lost the future he had always dreamed of with the woman he loved still, Cain's daughter Sheba. Valor of the Sky had been killed. What remained of his people had disappeared quickly as the battle came to an end. They had their vengeance, Apollo supposed, and would likely return to their homeworld satisfied. Apollo mourned Valor alone, since only he among all of humanity had ever known the Sky as anything more than silent allies. Between them, the *Galactica*, the *Daedelus* and the *Pegasus* had one hundred and seven Vipers; they'd each lost more than half of their force of Warriors and starfighters. Thirty-seven fleet vessels, all but five of them entirely civilian, had been obliterated, including the *Scorpius Ascending*, the *Valkyrior*, and *Agro-2*. With Cain's evacuated colonists and four added warships, however, the number of ships in the fleet had only dropped by nineteen.

The loss of *Agro-2* was felt profoundly. They needed food…needed somewhere to grow it. Needed more tylium to make fuel.

There was a somber mood among the people of the fleet. They had met an enemy perhaps even more deadly than the Cylons, and by and large, had lived to tell of it. Had lived, in truth, to fight another day. And perhaps,

Apollo thought, perhaps that was exactly the problem. The human race was tired of fighting. Tired of running.

He'd said it the day before. The words still echoed in his mind. This didn't feel much like victory.

Apollo stared at the starmaps that lit up on the inner walls of the sanctuary. This had been his father's private space The place he had gone to make sense of it all, to meditate on the Lords of Kobol, the true history, and true purpose of the Thirteenth Tribe. This was the place where he could let his fears and doubts show through in a way that he never could on the bridge, or in any corridor aboard the *Galactica*. Indeed, their current situation seemed all too familiar to Apollo. So many dead. Hundreds horribly wounded. People starving. Not enough food or fuel. In so many ways, he felt as though they had taken a step back nearly twenty yahren, to the days after they'd all first departed the Twelve Colonies that were their homes.

That had been a disaster.

So was this.

But Adama had stood tall, had taken the weight of the horror on his shoulders, with a grim set to his jaw and a sparkle of dreams in his eyes. Apollo would do the same.

He would find a home for his people, be it Earth or some other destination. He would find the truth about the Lords of Kobol, and then he would demand that they explain themselves.

For now, unlike his father, Apollo was angry. The Lords of Kobol had given their descendants much, but they had then abandoned them to the vagaries of time, and to the predators of space. They were, he had decided, the scientists of the galaxy. They had set civilizations in motion across the universe, and then settled back to observe.

Apollo would lead his people the way Adama had before him. He would lead them to safety—would lead them, one day, to glory.

But along the way, he would find those Light Ships once again and confront the Lords of Kobol. And he would demand an explanation. Apollo would tell them that humanity was not an experiment. And then, when all that was through, perhaps then, he thought he might rest.

In his quarters, Baltar stared at the black miasma that was Count Iblis, and sneered at the thing. He had his own agenda, true, but he needed Iblis' help now more than ever. He had fallen out of favor. Tigh had seen to that.

But he would climb back again, with Siress Kiera's aid. He would not be confined to quarters forever.

"My dear Count Iblis, I cannot tell you where we are because I cannot even leave my quarters," Baltar said, hating the whine he heard in his own voice.

The darkness roiled in front of him, agitated.

"All right then," Count Iblis replied. "When you learn more, contact me again. I will hear your mind calling me. Until then, you are worthless to me."

Baltar blanched. "But I… I…" he stammered. "I need your help." By then, Iblis had gone.

In the Xerik system, above the surface of the Chitain homeworld, where a militant civilization was already rebuilding itself, and fanning the flames of hatred against humanity, three Cylon base-stars stood motionless in space.

Within the largest of the three, the Cylon cogitator known as Lucifer stood silently in the shadows of the Imperious Leader's chamber, and listened in astonishment to a conversation in Kobollian, the language of humans.

His master had been speaking to the darkness again, to the pool of blackness that swirled like a maelstrom high above the chamber floor. Whatever was on the other side of that portal had beseeched the Imperious Leader's aid.

Even stranger was the name by which the darkness had addressed Lucifer's master, the Cylon's Imperious Leader.

It had called him *Iblis*.

Glossary

altered—intoxicated and/or under the influence of drugs *ambrosa*—extremely valuable, rare, sweet alcoholic beverage *anchor spikes*—nails

apex pulsar—the top, center engine on the back of a Viper *ascensior*—similar to an elevator

avion—bird

base star—a Cylon equivalent to a Colonial battlestar *berth*—bed

beschkurd—a green, leafy vegetable common to most Colonial planets *bova*—large, livestock animal kept in herds

brain crystals—outlawed chemical weapon causing portions of the brain to wither and harden as if frozen

buritician—a member of the hereditary nobility of the Colonies *c* entari —equivalent to nearly one minute; one hundred microns *Centurion*—a Cylon Warrior

centimetron—1/100th of a metron, or about 1/2 an inch *centon*—equivalent to an hour; one hundred centari

chancery—casino

cogitator—a Cylon diplomat; *e.g.* Lucifer

commander's court—military court

coneth stew—a spicy vegetable dish made with bova meat *crawlon*—spider

cubit—oregg coin used for money

cycle—work details and duties are divided into two eight-hour periods and one nine-hour period, or cycle, per ship's day

Cyranus—galaxy containing the Twelve Colonies

daggit—similar to a lupus, but more domesticated; a house pet *fallaga* —a plant found on Qorax

felgercarb—bulls 't

fiberline—thin, strong rope

flanchette—a stinging insect

flatscreen—computer screen

flexi-weave—a type of fabric

frack—an expletive

frizzort—mishap, error, malfunction

fumarello—similar to a cigar, but smaller

fundamental code—a language of sounds and/or gestures and images, which are believed to have significance to most sentient lifeforms *furlon*—a leave of absence

grog—an alcoholic beverage, similar to rum

gyro-capacitor—the energy transference system used in starships *helm* —the helmet worn by Colonial pilots

heffala berries—a fruit native to Caprica, grown aboard the Colonial fleet's agro-ships

hydronic mushies—artificially grown, nutritious vegetable *imager*—high-tech mirror

infosphere—data storage capsule

kirasolis—a sticky, caramel-like candy

kyluminum—a lightweight, plasteen/saligium alloy

launch aperture—energy-shielded opening in a starship bay through which smaller ships take off and land

lupus—wolf-like animal

magnalift—hi-tech crane

mealprep—kitchen

metron—approximately one meter

micron—equivalent to a fraction of a second; 1/1 OOth of a centari *micronoscope*—a powerful electronic microscope

mindwipe—fool or idiot; someone whose use of altering substances has had adverse effects on his or her brain functions

mucoid—slimy, sticky

mugjape—maggot-like creatures; the larval stage of skreeters *musiclink* —fleet equivalent to radio

navi-hilt—Colonial Viper steering column; also controls turbolasers *novayahren*—birthday

ogliv—prickly skinned, sweet fruit

oregg—precious metal, equivalent to gold

plasteen—an indestructible plastic

pogees—testicles

pulsar—space vessel propulsion engine

pyramid—a game of chance played with cards

saligium—a heavy metal alloy used mainly for construction *S-cube*—simulcast sight-and-sound unit; similar to a videocamera *Seal*—marriage

sensorline—physical connection between two tech systems *servitor*—waiter

skreeter—bothersome but essentially harmless insect *skyeye*—spherical, many lensed, hovering camera

slagger—slothful person

socialator—man or woman trained and educated to be the perfect companion, both sexually and socially

solonite—a powerful synthetic explosive made from solium *solium*—a dangerously explosive byproduct of the tylium refinement process; in gaseous form, also poisonous

support vapors—life-support system aboard starships *sylvanus*—metal used for adornment, similar to brass

” trank it” —calm down

Trans Vid—television

temblor—earthquake

triad—a contact sport, native to the Colonies, wherein two two-player teams compete in a triangular court

Tribunal—court hearing

tulipian buds—exotic appetizier or side dish made from vegetables

tyliwn—an extremely unstable, rare mineral, but found in large quantities when found at all; refined tylium is used as fuel to power Colonial space-faring vessels.

Qorax—a planet in the fourth quadrant of the Cyranus galaxy

valcron—a simple fabric used for clothing, bedding, *etc.*

week—ten days

yahren—equivalent to a year; two hundred fifty days